



# Great Wall of Steel

China's Global Campaign to  
Suppress the Uyghurs

 Wilson  
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BRADLEY JARDINE

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**KISSINGER INSTITUTE ON CHINA  
AND THE UNITED STATES**

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

[www.wilsoncenter.org](http://www.wilsoncenter.org)

Cover: © Yettesu  
ISBN 978-1-7359401-7-5  
March 2022

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# Foreword

The Kissinger Institute is pleased to present Bradley Jardine's *Great Wall of Steel, China's Global Campaign to Suppress the Uyghurs*, the culmination of over two years' work.

Since 2018, global concern for Uyghurs has centered on internment camps where Beijing has forcibly "re-educated" between one and two million Turkic citizens of Xinjiang and, more recently, on the question of whether parolees from the camps are forced to work harvesting cotton and processing polysilicon. Global concern for the rights of Chinese Uyghurs has resulted in sanctions, a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics, and action against Chinese and foreign firms involved in forced labor supply chains.

To date, international censure of China has been based on how Uyghurs are treated within China itself. With *Great Wall of Steel*, Bradley Jardine proves that that focus, while intense, has been too narrow: China is pursuing, harassing, and detaining Chinese Uyghurs and Kazakhs around the world and returning them to China for punishment whenever possible. These refolements are pervasive, tenacious, and often illegal. They reveal a Chinese diplomatic and policing capability that disregards sovereign borders and national and international laws in pursuit of security, as defined by Beijing.

Through his research, interviews, and travels in Russia, China, and Central Asia, Mr. Jardine has compiled the most thorough known database of worldwide Uyghur renditions. Sadly, we can be sure that his record is far from complete.

Bradley Jardine has gone where the evidence led him. He does not write for geopolitical reasons—he is not interested in blackening China's eyes as part of the competition between China and the West. He has written this report only out of concern for the welfare of people targeted by China's security ministries.

*Great Wall of Steel* offers his findings in the service of policy relevant scholarship. The Wilson Center was founded to bring such scholarship to the attention of the public, Congress, and the Executive Branch. We are grateful to Bradley Jardine for helping Wilson to fulfill its mission and for directing our attention to the men and women whose stories he tells in this volume.

*Robert Daly*

Director, Kissinger Institute on China and the United States  
The Wilson Center

# Abbreviations

<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>ETIM</b>	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
<b>ETIP</b>	Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party
<b>ETLO</b>	East Turkestan Liberation Organization
<b>ETPRP</b>	East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party
<b>ETR</b>	Turkic Islamic Republic of East Turkestan
<b>GMD</b>	Guomindang
<b>GWOT</b>	Global War on Terror (U.S.)
<b>IJOP</b>	Integrated Joint Operations Program
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>ISI</b>	Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan)
<b>KTJ</b>	Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad
<b>MPS</b>	Ministry of Public Security
<b>MSS</b>	Ministry of State Security
<b>NSA</b>	National Security Agency (Egypt)
<b>OIC</b>	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
<b>PAP</b>	People's Armed Police
<b>PLA</b>	People's Liberation Army
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>PSB</b>	Public Security Bureau

<b>RFA</b>	Radio Free Asia
<b>SCO</b>	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
<b>TIP</b>	Turkestan Islamic Party
<b>UFWD</b>	United Front Work Department
<b>UHRP</b>	Uyghur Human Rights Project
<b>ULO</b>	Uyghur Liberation Organization
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nation High Commission on Refugees
<b>UNHRC</b>	United Nations Human Rights Council
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>URFET</b>	United Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan
<b>WUC</b>	World Uyghur Congress
<b>XPCC</b>	Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps
<b>XUAR</b>	Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

# Timeline of Key Events

<b>1884</b>	Uyghur region incorporated as a Qing province and named “Xinjiang” (New Frontier)
<b>1911</b>	Xinhai Revolution
<b>1916–1928</b>	Warlord Era (China)
<b>1917</b>	Russian Revolution
<b>1927–1937</b>	Chinese Civil War (Phase I)
<b>1933–1934</b>	First East Turkestan Republic
<b>January–April, 1934</b>	Soviet invasion of Xinjiang
<b>1937–1945</b>	Japanese invasion and Second World War
<b>1944–1949</b>	Second East Turkestan Republic
<b>1945–1949</b>	Chinese Civil War (Phase II)
<b>1949</b>	Establishment of the People’s Republic of China
<b>August 25, 1949</b>	Leadership of Second East Turkestan Republic dies in mysterious plane crash
<b>1954</b>	Establishment of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps
<b>1956</b>	Hundred Flowers Campaign
<b>1957</b>	Anti-Rightist Movement
<b>1958–1962</b>	Great Leap Forward
<b>1958–1989</b>	Sino-Soviet Split
<b>1962</b>	Yi-Ta Incident
<b>1966–1976</b>	Cultural Revolution
<b>1972</b>	U.S. President Richard Nixon visits the PRC
<b>1979</b>	Completion of the Karakorum Highway

<b>1979–1989</b>	Soviet invasion and war in Afghanistan
<b>June 4, 1989</b>	Tiananmen Square Massacre
<b>1990</b>	“Baren incident”
<b>1991</b>	Collapse of the USSR
<b>1997</b>	Mass unrest in Ghulja
<b>September 11, 2001</b>	9/11 Terrorist Attacks and the launch of the GWOT
<b>2002</b>	ETIM recognized as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and UN
<b>July 3–11, 2007</b>	Operation Silence (Pakistan)
<b>August 2008</b>	Beijing Olympics
<b>July 4–5, 2009</b>	Mass unrest in Ürümchi
<b>2011</b>	Arab Spring
<b>September 2013</b>	Announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan
<b>October 28, 2013</b>	Attack on Tiananmen Square
<b>March 1, 2014</b>	Attack in Kunming
<b>May 2014</b>	“People’s War on Terror” and “Strike Hard Against Violent Extremism” campaigns announced
<b>August 29, 2016</b>	Chen Quango appointed as CCP Committee Secretary of the XUAR
<b>August 30, 2016</b>	Suicide attack on Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
<b>March 2017</b>	“XUAR De-Extremification Regulation” legislation put into place
<b>July 2017</b>	Mass detention of Uyghur students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt
<b>March 2019</b>	Atajurt Eriktileri activist Serikzhan Bilash detained in Kazakhstan
<b>August 15, 2021</b>	Taliban recapture Afghanistan

# Notes on Terminology

**THE UYGHURS ARE** a largely Muslim people who speak a Turkic language closely related to Uzbek. These cultural and linguistic elements serve to distinguish them from China's Han majority, who today account for 94 percent of the country's overall population. Over 11 million Uyghurs currently live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), with a further 300,000 living in diaspora communities, the majority of them concentrated in Central Asia. Though China's repression in the XUAR extends to other Turkic minorities such as the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz and the non-Turkic Hui, Mongol, and Tajik peoples, the Uyghurs form the core of this study.

The term "Uyghur" re-emerged in the 19th century to refer to the diverse Turkic Muslims of populous oasis cities like Qāshqār but is actually an anachronism, denoting the peoples of the 8th century, largely-Buddhist Uyghur Empire that ruled over much of the modern-day XUAR's territory.<sup>1</sup> The term was adopted by intellectuals across the region following a Soviet-sponsored conference in 1921. While the idea of a Uyghur nation is a recent concept, as explored in David Brophy's excellent study *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, the much older processes of Islamization and Turkification that took place by the 13th century created the foundations for a common national Uyghur culture to emerge in the 20th century.<sup>2</sup>

This sense of identity began to crystallize in the tumult of the British, Russian, and Qing conflict for geopolitical dominance in the region that

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1 A literary people, the Uyghurs provided Genghis Khan's empire with its writing system and exerted a strong cultural influence on his inner court. A prominent Uyghur intellectual even taught Ghengis Khan's sons to read and write. The original Uyghurs vanished from the historical record by the 17th century.

2 For more on this, see David Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 173–204. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674660373>.

has commonly been referred to as the “Great Game” (see chapter one).<sup>3</sup> These colonial rivalries had additional consequences for the region, including tensions over control of XUAR lands. This tension is most evident in the debate over naming conventions for the territory itself. China’s government continues to refer to the region as Xinjiang, which translates loosely as “New Frontier.” This name was given to it in 1884 following the Qing Empire’s decision to incorporate it as an official province. Some Uyghurs, meanwhile, prefer the term *Shārqi Türkistan* (East Turkestan), stressing the indigenous nature of the region’s Turkic population and their historical interconnectedness with the Central Asian republics across the border. I have avoided either framing throughout this study, preferring to use the somewhat depoliticized term “Uyghur region” to avoid either colonialist or Uyghur nationalist conventions. I use the term “Xinjiang” only in titles for the sake of reader familiarity or where it is historically necessary to do so—including within quotations or when referring to books, articles, and citations. I tend to use the region’s official Communist-era name “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” when emphasizing the institutional nature of the region and its impact on policymaking.

Of course, studying the Uyghurs as an ethnic or national minority is to accept the terms of the debate as set by China’s government. This disconnect between framing Uyghurs as a Chinese minority or as a stateless nation has significant implications for security perceptions in the XUAR.<sup>4</sup> As with my use of “Uyghur region” over “Xinjiang,” I have chosen to situate this study narrowly within the confines of the present geopolitical realities regarding the XUAR’s status within China. I caveat this understanding by adopting Dru Gladney’s framework of “internal-colonialism” as practiced by China’s governments in the Uyghur region.<sup>5</sup> This latter point is central

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3 The term “Great Game” was used by British diplomats to refer to the contest with the Russian Empire in Eurasia in the 19th century. It gained popular usage as a historical term in 1901 with the publication of British author Rudyard Kipling’s novel *Kim*.

4 Dibyesh Anand, “Colonization with Chinese characteristics: Politics of (In)security in Xinjiang and Tibet,” *Central Asian Survey* 38, no.1, 2018: 129–147, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2018.1534801>.

5 Dru Gladney, “Internal Colonialism and the Uyghur Nationality: Chinese Nationalism and its Subaltern Subjects,” *Cahiers d’Etudes sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien*, (1998): 25.

to understanding the present crisis (see chapter one) and scholars such as Michael Clarke have argued that this settler-colonial dynamic has put the government of China on its current path to cultural genocide.<sup>6</sup>

For Uyghur transliterations in this study, I have adopted the same Romanization system produced by Komatsu, et. al., as adopted in the volume *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*.<sup>7</sup> This appears to be the closest representation of the Uyghur language phonetic system that I am aware of. For Chinese language terms and place names, I have opted to use standard *pinyin* minus the tone marks. Naming conventions for people follow the traditional model of a family name followed by a given name. I have chosen to use the indigenous place names for places in the region (for example “Ghulja” rather than Yining), except when it is necessary to convey a point of contestation with reference to Chinese government variations. Some of the renderings will appear unfamiliar to general audiences, with spellings like Ürümqi rather than the more commonplace rendering Urumqi. When discussing other regions such as Central, South, East Asia, and the MENA, I use more familiar English renderings of places according to the American Library Association-Library of Congress romanization systems rather than their own local variants. This is but one example of the challenges of a research agenda that spans the globe. I hope my readers can forgive these inconsistencies.

Many of the people I interviewed for this report chose to remain anonymous. I have honored their request by adopting pseudonyms where noted.

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6 Michael Clarke, “Settler Colonialism and the Path Toward Cultural Genocide in Xinjiang,” *Global Responsibility to Protect* 13 , no. 1, (February 16, 2021): 9–19, [https://brill.com/view/journals/gr2p/13/1/article-p9\\_9.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/gr2p/13/1/article-p9_9.xml).

7 *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*, ed. Ildiko Beller-Hann, M. Cristina Cesaro, Rachel Harris, et. al., (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2007).

# Executive Summary

**THIS STUDY AIMS** to promote a better understanding of how China targets members of the Uyghur diaspora community through transnational repression. My findings rely on publicly reported cases of China’s Party-state reaching across sovereign boundaries to silence dissent as well as my own interviews with the Uyghur diaspora community.

The People’s Republic of China has engaged in transnational repression in 44 countries since 1997. From then until January 2022, there were 1,574 publicly reported cases of detentions and refolements of Uyghurs to China, where they faced imprisonment and torture in police custody. While the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) account for the highest degree of repression at 689 registered incidents, South Asia has been catching up with 668 cases of transnational repression. The China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset I developed alongside this report in partnership with the Uyghur Human Rights Project and the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, contains 5,532 cases of Uyghurs facing intimidation, 1,150 cases of Uyghurs detained in their host country and 424 cases of Uyghurs deported, extradited, or rendered back to China.<sup>1</sup> Of the 523 most detailed cases recorded in the full dataset, I logged 108 deportations, 89 incidents of Uyghurs being coerced to return to the XUAR, 11 renditions, and nine extraditions. These figures are just the tip of the iceberg, and primary evidence indicates that the scale is likely much more extensive than is officially reported.

According to my findings, China’s campaign of transnational repression has evolved over three distinct stages. During the first stage (1997–2007), local security services in South and Central Asia either deported or detained 84 Uyghurs across nine countries; in the second phase (2008–2013),

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1 See the full, interactive dataset: “China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset,” Uyghur Human Rights Project, and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, <https://oxussociety.org/viz/transnational-repression/>.

security services targeted 126 individuals across 13 countries, primarily in Southeast Asia; and in the ongoing third phase (2014–present), 1,364 Uyghurs have been detained, extradited, or rendered from 18 countries concentrated in the Middle East and North Africa. These phases abroad correlate to events within the XUAR and to growing international focus on the policies China pursues there.

See maps presented below:

**FIGURE 1:** Map of China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs, stages 2 and 3 throughout phase one (1997–2007). Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.<sup>2</sup>



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2 A version of this map first appeared in Bradley Jardine, Edward Lemon, and Natalie Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China’s Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs*, (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, June 24, 2021), <https://uhrp.org/report/no-space-left-to-run-chinas-transnational-repression-of-uyghurs/>.

**FIGURE 2:** Map of China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs, stages 2 and 3 throughout phase two (2008–2013). Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.<sup>3</sup>



**FIGURE 3:** Map of China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs, stages 2 and 3 throughout phase three (2014–present). Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.<sup>4</sup>



3 A version of this map first appeared in Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs*.

4 A version of this map first appeared in Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs*.

But these physical instances of China’s transnational repression are just the beginning. My survey of Uyghur case reports reveals a much broader use of “every day” tactics, including digital threats, phishing attacks, malware, and coercion via threats to relatives in the XUAR (see page 18 for a complete list of methods I have codified for this project). I have recorded 5,532 additional cases of China’s government targeting Uyghurs abroad using intimidation and harassment to monitor and silence them.<sup>5</sup>

See map below for reported cyberattacks:

**FIGURE 4:** Cyberattacks on Uyghurs worldwide (2002–2021). This map shows the 2,774 cases of cyberattacks in the China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset, a majority of which targeted the World Uyghur Congress in Germany. The image does not include two telecom hacking incidents in Kazakhstan and Pakistan, as there were no detailed numbers reported in international media. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.<sup>6</sup>



5 “China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset.”

6 A version of this map first appeared in: Natalie Hall and Bradley Jardine, “*Your Family Will Suffer*”: *How China is Hacking Surveillance and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies*, (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, November 10, 2021), <https://uhrp.org/report/your-family-will-suffer-how-china-is-hacking-surveillance-and-intimidating-uyghurs-in-liberal-democracies/>.

## The study reveals the following trends:

- **China's transnational repression is a growing phenomenon.** There is a uniformity to China's repressive practices in multiple cultural contexts, with more incidents against Uyghurs living overseas logged than is typically understood. China's government employs a broad range of techniques, including asset freezes; passport controls; cyberattacks and malware; intimidation and surveillance from its embassies and consulates; pressure on families and coercion-by-proxy; spying through informants; smear campaigns; abuse of Interpol; abuse of extradition treaties; and use of partner security services to detain Uyghurs wherever they reside.

The web of institutions and frameworks used to enact these policies includes Interpol; bilateral extradition treaties; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; the United Front Work Department; the Ministry of Public Security; the Ministry of State Security; the Political and Legal Affairs Commission; the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau; and China's consulates and embassies overseas.

- **Over time, refugee escape routes from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have become increasingly limited.** In the wake of the Baren (1990) and Ghulja (1997) incidents, refugees escaped the Uyghur region through Central Asia. As the newly independent Central Asian republics became part of China's SCO security bloc, Uyghurs began to look for new places to settle. By 2009, in the aftermath of unrest in Ürümqi, Uyghurs sought to flee via South Asia (Pakistan and Afghanistan) and Southeast Asia, hoping to ultimately settle in Turkey. These states gradually became co-opted as well, forcing Uyghurs to seek ever more inventive ways to escape China's Party-state. In 2017, the final route available for Uyghurs to flee to Turkey and further into the West began to close: Uyghurs in the MENA were no longer safe as China made economic agreements with regional governments that often included extradition clauses.

- **Modern communications technology is rapidly increasing instances of China’s transnational repression against Uyghurs.** Cyberattacks and other forms of online harassment are an increasingly common means of targeting and surveilling members of the Uyghur diaspora, particularly those residing in democratic countries. In addition, China’s tech companies are expanding their activities in strategic regions such as Central and South Asia and the MENA region, putting Uyghurs at risk of transnational surveillance. Under “smart cities” programs, companies engaged in racial profiling of Uyghurs in the XUAR are now integrating Eurasian capitals within China’s “Digital Silk Road” project. Planned surveillance programs include security systems in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.
- **Less severe forms of transnational repression are often a precursor to harsher methods.** Online harassment, threats to family, manipulation of passport systems, *hajj* restrictions, and the use of spyware grab fewer headlines than deportations or abuse of Interpol Red Notices. However, each of these practices works to marginalize Uyghurs in the societies where they reside, leaving them vulnerable to more coercive forms of repression. The international community needs to work to counteract not only the refoulement and extralegal detention of refugees, but the intimidation, threats, and enforced statelessness that pave the way to these practices.
- **The majority of physical acts of transnational repression conducted by China are done through partnerships with foreign security services.** The most common form of physical transnational repression involves exploiting domestic and international institutions to detain or deport Uyghurs unlawfully at China’s request. Transnational repression thus undermines the rule of law in countries that have Uyghur populations and, in some instances, sees China’s legal understanding of citizenship overriding that of these states. Moreover, China’s actions entail a degree of sovereignty erosion, with evidence of Chinese intelligence using Dubai as a base of operations, MSS officers present in Egyptian prison facilities and college campuses, and a growing security presence on Tajikistan’s territory.

## The U.S. should:

- **Strengthen its refugee resettlement programs by increasing quotas and streamlining procedures.** The U.S. and its allies should increase their quota of refugees from China and third countries likely to extradite citizens to China, such as Turkey, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Governments should also streamline their procedures for vetting and granting asylum to refugees. Countries such as Thailand, which account for most extraditions, should be pressured to revise their asylum procedures to better protect human rights.
- **Require reports on China's transnational repression to legislative bodies.** Democratic states should adopt similar policies to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, and require relevant government departments and agencies to submit reports to their parliaments on the human rights violations in the Uyghur region. These reports should also list key officials, entities, and others responsible for intimidating, harassing, or targeting members of the Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic Muslim groups from the XUAR within their territories.
- **Create an avenue for Uyghurs to report harassment and intimidation to domestic security services.** Uyghurs living in democratic states should be able to report harassment, intimidation, and threats they face to their host governments. Domestic security services should work with the local Uyghur diaspora community to ensure that it is user-friendly, accessible, and Uyghur language-enabled.
- **Restrict the export of surveillance technology. States in the West must prevent the sale of Western surveillance tools to illiberal regimes, including China.** With an array of powerful tools on the market—from malware to cameras and software—it is crucial that the West stop the sale and proliferation of these tools to states who would abuse them.

## Prelude: Exiles

**ABU BAKKER QASSIM**, a Uyghur Muslim from China's XUAR, had lived a quiet life. In the morning, he would bathe himself in the courtyard outside his bedroom and smoke a cigarette in his hometown of Ghulja (Yining). During the day, he would work twelve-hour shifts in a local leather factory before returning home exhausted in the evening. He would repeat this simple routine for most of his early adult life. But with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Abu Bakker and many Uyghurs like him were quick to take advantage of the new trade opportunities presented by the opening of China's borders with the five newly-established Central Asian republics.

By 1994, Turkic-speaking peoples from across the region flocked to the bustling markets of the Uyghur region's major cities like Qāshqār, Ürümchi, and Ghulja to exchange goods and services. In these times of relative prosperity, the Uyghur merchant would buy old Soviet clocks and wristwatches, repair them, and sell them for a profit in the affluent coastal markets of Shanghai. "Life was good," he said with a sigh. "But it didn't last."

During our long phone call, Abu Bakker told me he felt worn out.<sup>1</sup> After two decades of fleeing persecution across three continents, he was trapped in a bureaucratic maze awaiting asylum in the southern European country of Albania. Moreover, due to China's global campaign to have Uyghurs detained and deported, people like him have been left isolated within their communities and stigmatized by accusations of terrorism. "People become very defensive around me," he said. "They fear that being around me will bring them trouble."

The turning point in Abu Bakker's life came in 1997. That year, his hometown of Ghulja was wracked by conflict between Turkic minorities and police that shook the city to its core, bringing thousands of Kazakhs and Uyghurs out onto the streets to protest against the Chinese Communist

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1 Abu Bakker Qassim (Uyghur Guantánamo detainee), phone interview by Bradley Jardine, May 22, 2020, audio.

Party (CCP)'s regional policies. In retaliation, Chinese police began cordoning off the streets and arresting activists by the thousands, along with an unknown number of Ghulja residents like Abu Bakker who hadn't even taken part in the demonstrations. He described himself as having been "apolitical." Dragged from his home in the middle of the night and beaten bloody with a crowbar, China's security officers tortured him to within an inch of his life before they finally let him go.

His ordeal was just beginning. Every day, police showed up at his house, trashed his furniture, barked orders at him, and threatened him in exchange for bribes. Finally, after three months of harassment, he had had enough. On January 12, 2000, he packed his bags and flew to the Kyrgyz Republic in search of a better life. Before the plane lifted off from the runway, Abu Bakker recalls feeling tormented by visions of police marching on board to drag him to prison. "If they had caught me and brought me off the plane, I swear to Allah I'd have spent the rest of my life in jail."

For two years, he worked in Kyrgyzstan's largest markets, including the famed Dordoy Bazaar. But he was disappointed. In post-Soviet Central Asia, Uyghurs were ostracized from broader society and faced the same repressive laws and petty corruption as they had in the homeland they had tried to leave behind. Every month police would take bribes and threaten to send Abu Bakker and other Uyghurs back to China if they refused to pay up. Central Asia was not the haven for Uyghurs he had dreamed of. Frustrated and yearning for a better life, he again rolled the dice. If he could only make it to Pakistan, cross his way through the Islamic Republic of Iran and get to Turkey—where he would be safe among Istanbul's large Uyghur diaspora—he would be free. Instead, he found himself stranded in Afghanistan.

The problems began on the Iranian border after its authorities demanded that he obtain a Pakistani residence permit before receiving a business visa to pass through their country. Faced with the crippling costs of waiting in Islamabad for two months, he decided to try his luck waiting in a Uyghur-populated village across the border in Afghanistan, where he could stay in the local *madrassa*, a Muslim college, free of charge. Such towns had begun to spring up in the 1960s as Uyghurs fled the tumult of China's Communist ruler Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) for neighboring Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Soviet Central Asia. By the time Abu Bakker decided to escape, Afghanistan was one of the only countries

in the region that had not signed an agreement with Beijing to extradite Uyghurs to China.

In a cruel twist of fate, the village in which Abu Bakker arrived had just been swept up in a geopolitical storm. Within a week of his arrival, American military aircraft began circling overhead to patrol the mountains. The remote village, secluded from the rest of Afghanistan and lacking basic radio connectivity, was blind to what was happening. If they had had access to the news, the villagers would have realized that the U.S. had launched its Global War on Terror (GWOT). Instead, Abu Bakker awoke on December 7, 2001, startled by the sound of explosions as the U.S. began its aerial bombing campaign. The young Uyghur and 18 other villagers fled in the middle of the night and scattered into the surrounding network of caves. The second wave of planes reduced the village to dust within the hour, leaving the villagers frightened and without food. The only course of action left was to make their way through the mountain passageways under cover of darkness into neighboring Pakistan.

Surviving on melted snow, the Uyghur villagers made it across the border after several months. Within a day, Pakistani bounty hunters captured them. Abu Bakker remained silent in their custody, frightened they would send him back to China if they knew he was a Uyghur. Instead, an American voice asked in English: “Who are the Uyghurs?” The U.S. military had paid the bounty hunters to capture extremists and Taliban fighters at the border. Though this meant Abu Bakker was unlikely to be sent to China, he nevertheless found himself imprisoned. He was sent over 7,500 miles away to Cuba, along with 21 other Uyghurs who came to be known as the Guantánamo 22.

When their 2002 arrest by American forces occurred, Beijing was considered a key ally in the GWOT. Twenty years later, the U.S. and China are locked in a geopolitical struggle for global influence—and the Uyghurs are caught in the middle. Under the auspices of counterterrorism, Beijing has unleashed a wave of repression against minority peoples on a scale unheard of since the Second World War. Using a combination of demographic resettling and forced sterilization, concentration camps, a panopticon of 21st-century surveillance technology, and forced labor, the CCP has sought to systematically re-engineer Uyghur culture within a Han-centric political framework. Now scattered as far afield as Bermuda and the Republic

of Palau, the Guantánamo 22 exiles have come to symbolize the impact of China's rise on human rights.

Why did this band of Uyghur refugees fleeing China's persecution end up in the world's most notorious prison complex? Before he arrived in Guantánamo, Abu Bakker and other Uyghurs from the Afghan village had told their American interrogators in Afghanistan that they had received small-arms training with Kalashnikov rifles. In the hostile mountains of Afghanistan, torn asunder by decades of war and poverty, such guns are the only form of defense for small, sequestered communities. There was only one rifle available with which to practice. Other Uyghurs said they met with Hasan Maksum at the camp, founder of the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP), also known more commonly (and erroneously) as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM is considered a global terrorist organization by Beijing and, prior to a 2020 decision to revoke this recognition, the United States. However, some of the Guantánamo 22 argue their presence in the village and interactions with Maksum did not make them members of ETIP/ETIM—an organization some argue was, in effect, largely a fiction created by the Party-state to legitimize its assault on Uyghur culture—much less enemies of the United States.

Such nuance was lost in the political wrangling of the GWOT. By 2002, the U.S. State Department had designated ETIM a global terror organization, noting in a security briefing that between 1990 and 2001, “members of ETIM reportedly committed over 200 acts of terrorism in China, resulting in at least 162 deaths and over 440 injuries.” These briefings uncritically repeated China's unverified claims against ETIM (see chapter three). The reality is that much of the data presented by Beijing remains dubious. If any such organization truly existed, it was doubtful it operated globally, let alone within the heavily policed Uyghur region.

Only in 2004 were the Guantánamo 22 permitted to speak with a lawyer. Chained up and treated like terrorists, each of them pleaded their innocence to their American interrogators. But their pleas fell on deaf ears. On several occasions, Chinese intelligence officers interrogated them in Guantánamo. “I will not talk to you. You have caused us trouble for more than 70 years,” Abu Bakker told the Han officers. “You have destroyed East Turkestan.” The officers responded: “There is no ‘East Turkestan,’ there is

only Xinjiang,” repeating a long-established ideological conflict between the Han and Uyghur peoples as to who controls this vast region.

Chinese officers interrogated the men for up to eight hours per day for three days. According to the translator who represented the Uyghurs, U.S. soldiers held them in a chokehold while Chinese intelligence agents photographed them.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. government later provided its Chinese counterpart with classified files they had been collecting on the 22 Uyghurs—allegedly after promising to never share such sensitive information.

In 2008, the Guantánamo 22 brought a habeas-corpus suit to the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C. The court decided to overturn the government’s decision to label these Uyghurs “enemy combatants”—an ambiguous status that was used to justify their detention and interrogation at Guantánamo Bay.<sup>3</sup> The Obama administration accepted the court’s decision that the Uyghurs held at Guantánamo posed no danger to the United States and attempted to resettle them in Virginia, where there is a small Uyghur diaspora community. But the effort was rejected by the Republican opposition. Instead, the U.S. cut deals to resettle the Guantánamo 22 around the world, including Bermuda, Slovakia, Switzerland, and Albania—all far from American shores.

For years after his release, Abu Bakker lived in a squalid refugee center on the outskirts of the Albanian capital, Tirana. Under the watchful gaze of armed guards, he began studying the local language and pizza-making. Unsurprisingly, the southern European country doesn’t feel like home. “The [Albanian] government does not respect the law—it is just another mafia state like those in Central Asia,” he shrugs. “There’s no real democracy here.” He continues to receive some financial assistance from Tirana, but he cannot work without a passport. His wife and three children do not receive any government aid. “Without residency [status], we cannot work, we cannot travel, we cannot do anything,” he says. “We cannot buy a telephone card; we cannot open a bank account. If we had an asylum passport, we could travel. Do you understand? We could work.”

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2 Rushan Abbas (Uyghur Guantánamo translator), phone interview by Bradley Jardine, May 7, 2020, audio.

3 For more on this term please see Hamdi et. al. vs. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, no. 3–6696, (Supreme Court of the United States, 2003–2004), <https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/03pdf/03-6696.pdf>.

Meanwhile, the situation in the XUAR has only grown more severe. In 2014, China's leader, Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping,<sup>4</sup> visited the region and gave a series of speeches warning that unrest in Central and South Asia threatened China's hold over the Uyghur region. "After the United States pulls out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate Central Asia," he said. Later, during a trip to the Uyghur cultural center of Qäshqär, China's leader asserted that the government "must make terrorists scurry like rats across the street." In step with this dehumanizing rhetoric, policies have grown increasingly hardline.

In 2017, China's government staged a series of massive anti-terror rallies across the Uyghur region, with tens of thousands of rifle-toting People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops vowing to "bury the corpses of terrorists in the vast sea of the People's War on Terror." Following this aggressive display of force, Xi Jinping called for creating a "great wall of steel" to foster national unity and solidarity in the Uyghur region during an address to the National People's Congress in Beijing. "Just as one loves one's own eyes, one must love ethnic unity; just as one takes one's livelihood seriously, one must take ethnic unity seriously," he said. The comments echoed an infamous speech given by former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the aftermath of the government's 1989 massacre of student protesters on Beijing's Tiananmen Square and other parts of the country. Praising the troops responsible, Deng described them as a "great wall of iron and steel" before noting that "the army, under the leadership of the Party, will remain the defender of the country, the defender of socialism, and the defender of the public interest."

Two weeks before the 2017 military parades, a video was produced by the terrorist group Islamic State (IS) allegedly showing Uyghurs training in Iraq. "In retaliation for the tears that flow from the eyes of the oppressed, we will make your blood flow in rivers, by the will of Allah," one fighter in the video said in the Uyghur language. In the years since, human rights violations have occurred in the Uyghur region on an unprecedented scale. According to credible estimates based on open-source data, as many as 1.8 million people, more

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4 For more on Xi Jinping, see Evan Osnos, "Born Red: How Xi Jinping, an unremarkable provincial administrator, became China's most authoritarian leader since Mao," *The New Yorker*, March 30, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/06/born-red>

than 10 percent of the Uyghur population of the XUAR, have been interned in concentration camps known officially as “re-education centers.” According to government documents, the system of camps aims to “eradicate ideological viruses” via “patriotic education.” Accounts from former detainees who have fled the country paint a darker picture, describing harsh detention conditions, strict surveillance, and physical and psychological torture.

“I haven’t spoken to my family for three years,” says Abu Bakker. “My mother told me, ‘don’t call or don’t send money.’ I used to send money there. Every few months I’d send them 100 Euros. But she said, ‘I have money, don’t call again.’ I tried calling her again after that, but the line was dead. I have not heard from her again.”

In step with intensifying rhetoric in the Uyghur region, the CCP has also sought to shore up its defensive posturing in neighboring countries. In mountainous Tajikistan, Beijing has built reconnaissance facilities to survey that country’s fragile Afghan border. An English backpacker unwittingly alerted the international community of the move in 2016 after writing that he was having “a fun adventure hanging with Afghan commanders, Chinese military and Tajik soldiers...at the military checkpoints in the Little Pamir.”<sup>5</sup> As of December 2021, there is reason to believe China has at least four of these bases surveying Tajikistan for alleged “Uyghur militants.”<sup>6</sup> These defensive structures surround Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of land bordering China, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. General Secretary Xi Jinping has singled out this harsh terrain as a potential conduit for militants returning from Syria to infiltrate the XUAR.

For Uyghurs like Abu Bakker, China’s growing economic and political influence is a source of anxiety and psychological distress. As many people have repeated to me during interviews around the world for this study, they no longer feel safe. According to my findings, the Chinese Party-state’s hunt for members of the Uyghur diaspora spans 44 countries in a global dragnet designed to stifle criticism of its policies in their homeland.

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5 Jonny Duncan, “Afghanistan Wakhan Corridor and Little Pamir Travel Guide,” *Backpacking Man*, August 29, 2020, <https://backpackingman.com/afghanistan-wakhan-hiking-little-pamir/>.

6 Reid Standish, “From a Secret Base in Tajikistan, China’s War on Terror Adjusts to a New Reality,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 14, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-china-war-on-terror-afghan/31509370.html>.

# Introduction and Methodology

**CHINA'S TARGETING OF** the Uyghurs is part of a growing trend which Dana Moss and other scholars have termed “transnational repression.”<sup>1</sup> I refer to repression throughout this study in broad terms as any state-sponsored action that raises the stakes for political activism. Transnational repression takes this concept further, assessing how China’s Party-state attempts to quell Uyghur activism beyond its borders.

Throughout the 20th century, states have used infiltration, spying, and even extrajudicial killing to silence opposition in exile. Prominent examples include the assassination of Leon Trotsky by Soviet leader Josef Stalin’s henchman bearing an ice pick in Mexico in 1940, and the murder of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov with ricin injected by the tip of an umbrella in London in 1978.<sup>2</sup> But the scale of such activities has increased dramatically in the modern era.

In its 2021 report, “Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach,” Freedom House documented 608 incidents of transnational repression worldwide since 2018 and identified China as a key perpetrator of the practice.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have given three explanations for this increase in transnational repression. The first relates to rising migration levels and the formation of international civil society; second is the enhanced interactivity and global communication brought on by the digital revolution; and, finally, the increase in bilateral and multilateral mechanisms of cooperation for the targeting of political figures abroad, including Interpol and China’s Shanghai Cooperation

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1 Dana M. Moss, “Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization, and the Case of The Arab Spring,” *Social Problems* 63, no. 4, (November 2016): 480–98.

2 Alexander Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

3 Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, January 2021), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/FH\\_TransnationalRepressionReport2021\\_rev012521\\_web.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/FH_TransnationalRepressionReport2021_rev012521_web.pdf).

Organization (SCO).<sup>4</sup> Each of these factors has enhanced the threat perceptions of autocracies, as well as their capacity to respond.

The normative costs of engaging in transnational repression are low, which emboldens autocrats to make increasingly dramatic moves to stifle dissent. In May 2021, Belarus scrambled a jet fighter to divert a Ryanair passenger airplane flying from Greece to Lithuania to land in Minsk, claiming a bomb was on board. None was ever found; but police did take opposition journalist Roman Protasevich away when the plane landed in the Belarusian capital. The international community widely criticized the act as “state-sponsored piracy.”<sup>5</sup> Though Belarus has suffered sanctions, the economic penalties have done little to undermine Alexander Lukashenka’s hold on power. Belarus has continued to use transnational repression by targeting a Belarussian Olympic athlete at the Tokyo games for criticizing her government.<sup>6</sup>

China’s Party-state has unleashed several sweeping campaigns against overseas opponents in recent years. Since General Secretary Xi Jinping’s 2012 ascent to power, the CCP has embarked on “Operation Fox Hunt” and “Operation Skynet” designed to capture allegedly corrupt officials living around the world.<sup>7</sup> As China’s regime builds the largest police state in history, it is increasingly exporting repression. China’s Party-state has also increasingly pursued overseas ethnic minorities.

This report builds on the work of my “China’s Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs Database,” created in collaboration with the Uyghur Human

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4 Alexander Cooley and Matthew Schaff, *Grounding the Backlash: Regional Security Treaties, Counternorms, and Human Rights in Eurasia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 159–188, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/human-rights-futures/grounding-the-backlash-regional-security-treaties-counternorms-and-human-rights-in-eurasia/C9BE57CB8EF7569BD15C60749F5F2086>.

5 Sam Meredith, “Ryanair CEO Says Belarus Plane Grounding Was ‘State-Sponsored Piracy,’” *CNBC*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/24/ryanair-ceo-says-belarus-plane-grounding-was-state-sponsored-piracy-.html>.

6 Alicja Ptak, “Belarussian Sprinter Reaches Poland After Defying Order Home,” *Reuters*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/belarus-sprinter-tsimanouskaya-leaves-polish-embassy-tokyo-police-2021-08-03/>.

7 “China’s ‘Sky Net’ Campaign Nabs More Than 4,000 Fugitives Since 2015,” *China Global Television Network* April 24, 2018, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414e3559444d77457a6333566d54/index.html>.

Rights Project and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. The database tracks instances of transnational repression conducted by the Chinese state against Uyghur communities worldwide since 1997, when the first cases of detentions and deportations were recorded.<sup>8</sup> The project uses a three-stage model of transnational repression based on the Central Asia Political Exiles (CAPE) database at the University of Exeter to evaluate publicly recorded cases of repression:



8 The forms of transnational repression discussed in this report have largely targeted Uyghur former citizens of the XUAR. While I do not believe that only Uyghurs have been the targets of this repression, the cases in our dataset overwhelmingly show that Uyghurs living abroad are a special target of the Chinese state.

I have coded Stage 1 attacks according to a 10-part typology outlined below:<sup>9</sup>

Typology	Definition	Named example from database <sup>10</sup>
<b>Assets were frozen or seized</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals whose assets have been frozen or seized by China's government either in the Uyghur region or by a host state acting on behalf of China's government.	Mohamad Umer Khan
<b>Call to return home</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals summoned by Chinese Party-state representatives directly or by their family who the government is coercing to demand their return.	Mihray Erkin
<b>Cyberattacks and malware</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals targeted online using botnets, malware, spyware, email phishing attempts, DDoS, or other forms of cyberattack.	Nurgul Sawut
<b>Intelligence and data gathering</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals asked to pass personal information about themselves to China's government.	Halmat Rozi
<b>Intimidation, including active surveillance and threats</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals facing repeated contact from Chinese officials in the XUAR or the local embassy/consulate or family members coerced by Chinese officials via WeChat (coercion-by-proxy); are sent packages to their home address in their host country from the Uyghur region; are followed in their host countries by unknown individuals or unmarked vehicles; are photographed at protests; etc.	Abdujelil Emet

9 This Stage 1 typology first appeared in Hall and Jardine, *Your Family Will Suffer: How China is Hacking, Surveilling and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies*.

10 See the full, interactive dataset: "China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset."

Typology	Definition	Named example from database <sup>10</sup>
<b>Recruitment as informants</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals asked to pass information about other Uyghurs to China's government over an extended and ongoing period.	Erkin Kurban
<b>Restrictions on movement and legal status via passport control</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals being denied passport renewal and instead given illegal one-way travel documents that restrict their right to free movement.	Memet'eli Imam
<b>Restrictions on free speech and assembly, including attacks on journalists or public speakers</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals subjected to harassment, intimidation, and surveillance such that they are unable to exercise their right to free speech and freedom of assembly.	Reyhan Asat
<b>Smear campaigns</b>	Instances of an individual or group of individuals subjected to a Chinese government smear campaign meant to discredit them as individuals and cast doubt on their claims of human rights violations in the Uyghur region. These forms of attacks increasingly overlap with media publications of "proof-of-life" videos.	Quelbinur Sedik
<b>Use of proxies and threats</b>	Instances of an individual's family members, friends, colleagues, or other close associates being threatened with or are arrested or detained in the Uyghur region.	Nyrola Elima

While each incident follows at least one form of attack, I have coded several cases more than once to account for multi-pronged attacks or separate incidents taking place over an extended period of time. Each instance, separated by time and geography, is logged as a particular event, including those that target a previously targeted individual. An illustrative case here is Dolkun Isa, who has suffered multiple restrictions on his movement over

the course of many years in several different countries.

I have coded Stage 2 attacks according to a 5-part typology outlined below:

Typology	Definition	Named example from database <sup>11</sup>
<b>Formal detention</b>	Instances when an individual is arrested following formal court charges.	Abdesalam Salim and Ahmetcan Talib
<b>Irregular detention</b>	Instances when an individual is arrested without formal charges or on specious charges.	Osman Ahmat Tohti
<b>House arrest</b>	Instances when an individual is ordered to remain home for an extended period of time.	Seyit Tumturk
<b>Physical assault</b>	Instances when state-aligned perpetrators physically attack an individual.	Hashir Wahidi
<b>Destruction of property</b>	Instances when state-aligned perpetrators attack physical property such as homes, businesses, vehicles, or pets.	Muhammad Umer Khan

11 “China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset.”

I have coded Stage 3 attacks according to a 5-part typology outlined below:

Typology	Definition	Named example from database <sup>12</sup>
<b>Coercion to return</b>	Instances when an individual is coerced by their families and/or MSS/PSB to return to the Uyghur region, where they are then detained or disappeared upon their arrival. Unsuccessful coercions to return in which the Uyghur being targeted by the government of China does not return home are classified as Stage 1 “call to return.”	Ibrahim Seyit'akhun
<b>Deportation</b>	Instances when an individual is forcefully removed from a country's borders on the premise of having violated its laws.	Akhmadzhan Osman
<b>Extradition</b>	Instances when an individual in a host state is removed to another state requesting that individual be remanded to its custody for prosecution and/or punishment. Extradition is a law enforcement procedure between the two jurisdictions and depends on the arrangements made between them (generally an extradition treaty).	Yusuf Kadir Tohti
<b>Rendition</b>	Instances when a foreign criminal or suspect is covertly sent to a jurisdiction with less rigorous regulations regarding the humane treatment of prisoners.	Zinnetgul Tursun
<b>Assassination or attempt</b>	Instances when an individual is murdered or there is an attempted murder by individuals connected to the state.	Yusufjan Ahmed <sup>13</sup>

12 See the full, interactive dataset: “China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset.”

13 This is the only incident of its kind and I have been unable to verify a connection to government agents. As such, the case is not listed as an assassination attempt by the full dataset. Nevertheless, I feel it is useful to add this outlier to the table above for the purposes of highlighting it as a case for further investigation.

Of the 523 most detailed cases recorded in the full China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset, I logged 108 deportations, 89 incidents of Uyghurs being coerced to return to the XUAR, 11 renditions, and nine extraditions. 24 of the stage 3 incidents were left uncharacterized due to a lack of information on the individual cases. Further, I recorded 57 irregular detentions and 27 formal arrests in total. Much work remains to be done to better understand the legal mechanisms used by states cooperating with China to repress Uyghurs within their borders.<sup>14</sup>

For this study, I conducted 30 interviews with Uyghurs worldwide, including in Washington, D.C., Tirana, Tokyo, Rawalpindi, Istanbul, Munich, Dubai, Cairo, Adelaide, and Toronto. I also interviewed leading cybersecurity experts, activists, human rights lawyers, and security officials for additional context. Each interview was cross-checked with public accounts of the crackdown in the Uyghur region and beyond, especially with the aid of the Xinjiang Victims Database. For six key interviews, I spoke with interviewees for up to five sessions lasting up to a total of six hours per individual. These sessions were rigorously checked for narrative inconsistencies or omissions. The report also uses original language source materials in Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Urdu, including government documents and legal materials to build a detailed overview of China's transnational campaign to repress the Uyghurs.

## MAIN ACTORS AND MECHANISMS OF CHINA'S TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

In order to circumvent international law and conduct transnational surveillance, intimidation, detentions, and extraditions, China's government employs a wide range of institutions and instruments, detailed below.

### 1. China's Security Apparatus

The primary agencies involved in transnational repression are the powerful security services linked to the Party-state, including the Ministry of

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14 "China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset."

State Security (MSS) and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). The MSS, China's foreign intelligence service, has cooperated with intelligence agencies around the world, issuing lists of Uyghurs it was hunting in 2003, 2007, and 2012. These lists have resulted in the detention and refoulement of human rights activists, among others. The MPS, China's domestic police force, engages in transnational repression through intimidation of family members in the Uyghur region.<sup>15</sup> These activities are usually organized by the Ministry's junior partner, the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau (PSB).

## 2. United Front Work Department

The CCP Central Committee's United Front Work Department (UFWD) is an entity tasked with fostering pro-China discourse among overseas Chinese communities. It has played a key role in transnational repression of the Uyghurs through its recruitment of informants in the diaspora and mobilization of student unions to silence Uyghurs on university campuses. The UFWD is a high-level department that answers directly to the CCP's Central Committee and is coordinated by a group led by a member of China's Politburo Standing Committee.<sup>16</sup> The UFWD has received newfound importance under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, with almost 40,000 new cadres recruited in his first year in office and almost all Chinese embassies now employ UFWD personnel.<sup>17</sup> The UFWD includes a bureau dedicated to the XUAR.

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15 Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, James Leibold, and Daria Impiombato, *The Architecture of Repression: Unpacking Xinjiang's Governance*, Policy Brief, Report no. 51, (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 19, 2021), <https://www.politico.com/ff/?id=0000017c-a092-db91-affd-f99afc020000>.

16 Alex Joske, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work," *China Brief* 19, no. 9, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, May 9, 2019), [https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_f\\_tk=tKPBAJfck6jr4iySOEFMT.9T5EwSSv3J61L.x3IQgrM-1642265536-0-gaNycGzNCT0](https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/?__cf_chl_f_tk=tKPBAJfck6jr4iySOEFMT.9T5EwSSv3J61L.x3IQgrM-1642265536-0-gaNycGzNCT0).

17 Graeme Smith, "China: Magic Weapons and 'Plausible Deniability,'" Lowy Institute, April 30, 2018, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/plausible-deniability-and-united-front->

### 3. Political and Legal Affairs Commission

Many Uyghurs who have experienced transnational repression since 2017 have done so after their families were flagged by the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), an algorithmic surveillance system that sorts XUAR residents into binary categories of “trustworthy” and “suspicious.”<sup>18</sup> One of the prime categories for raising the suspicions of the XUAR’s Public Security Bureau is having any form of connection to one of 26 primarily Muslim-majority countries blacklisted by the IJOP.<sup>19</sup> Such connections are listed in local police reports as “enemy movements” and have been used to intimidate family members in the XUAR to threaten their relatives living abroad.<sup>20</sup> The system is operated by the CCP Central Committee’s Political and Legal Affairs Commission (PLAC) through a subsidiary organ known as the Counterterrorism and Stability Maintenance Command.<sup>21</sup> CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has referred to the PLAC as the Party’s “knife handle.”<sup>22</sup> This entity also runs surveillance operations within the re-education centers across the Uyghur region.

### 4. China’s Embassies and Consulates

China’s Embassies and consulates, directed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have also played an active role in surveilling and intimidating Uyghurs worldwide. China’s diplomatic missions have been denying Uyghurs the renewal of their expiring passports, telling them they must

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18 See “China’s Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App,” Human Rights Watch, May 1, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/01/chinas-algorithms-repression/reverse-engineering-xinjiang-police-mass>.

19 For more on the IJOP see Maya Wang “China: Big Data Fuels Crackdown in Minority Region,” Human Rights Watch, February 26, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/26/china-big-data-fuels-crackdown-minority-region>

20 “Ürümqi Public Security Bureau, Shuimogou District Branch, Weihuliang Police Station, Xiejing South Neighbourhood Police Substation [乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局苇湖梁派出所斜井南社区警务室],” Ürümqi Police Records, December 16, 2018, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/21048042-report2064>.

21 Xu, Leibold, and Impiombato, *The Architecture of Repression: Unpacking Xinjiang’s Governance*.

22 Ibid.

return to the XUAR in order to do so.<sup>23</sup> In a large number of cases, those who return are sent to re-education centers or disappear. Those who remain overseas, meanwhile, are denied legal status abroad, impacting their livelihoods, freedom of movement, and capacity to start new lives outside of China.

## 5. Extradition Treaties and Legal Agreements

China has signed 34 bilateral extradition treaties with partners around the world (see Appendix 1). These treaties are a vital component in Beijing's global campaign to suppress the Uyghurs.<sup>24</sup> International extradition is defined as a practice of one country formally surrendering an individual alleged of a crime to another country with jurisdiction over the crime charged. The Xinjiang Public Security Bureau often tortures Uyghurs to extract "confessions" against diaspora members. The prepared dossiers are then issued to states with extradition treaties to have targeted Uyghurs returned. Of the nine confirmed renditions in the dataset, six took place in Central Asia, indicating the close relationship these countries have retained with the PRC since their independence, as well as their weak rules of law that enable this practice.<sup>25</sup>

## 6. Chinese Multilateral Organizations

China has invested in parallel "order-building," creating international structures outside the Western system that it can use to pursue Uyghurs and exiles.<sup>26</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has been especially important in this regard. Its primary mandate is to fight the "Three Evils"

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23 For more on this see: *Weaponized Passports: The Crisis of Uyghur Statelessness*, (Washington, DC: Uyghur Human Rights Project, April 1, 2020), <https://uhrp.org/report/weaponized-passports-the-crisis-of-uyghur-statelessness/>.

24 See Appendix one for more information.

25 "China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset."

26 For more on China's "parallel order-building" see Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

of “terrorism, extremism, and separatism.”<sup>27</sup> According to provisions agreed upon in 2005, the SCO requires all members to recognize terrorist, extremist, and separatist acts, regardless of whether the members’ own laws classified them as such.<sup>28</sup> Due to many member states having loose definitions of these terms, as well as Article 2 of the SCO’s 2009 Convention on Counterterrorism simply defining terrorism as an “ideology of violence,” SCO member states are able to take advantage of these looser definitions to pursue political opponents abroad.<sup>29</sup>

The SCO operates mainly through two administrative bodies: a Secretariat based in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). Established in January 2006, RATS is a consolidated list of extremist, terrorist, and separatist individuals and groups that would include 2,500 individuals and 769 groups by September 2016. According to expert Thomas Ambrosio, “the RATS serves as the central locus of the process of ‘sharing worst practices’ amongst the SCO member states.”<sup>30</sup> The European Court of Human Rights has described these norms as “an absolute negation of the rule of law.”

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27 Stephen Aris, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: ‘Tackling the Three Evils.’ A Regional Response to Non-Traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 3, (May 2009): 457–482, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27752254>.

28 “Concept of Cooperation of State Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Fight Against Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism,” Shanghai Cooperation Organization, July 5, 2005, <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=8218>.

29 These loose definitions have also led to the killing of Uyghurs on SCO borders. On China’s western border in January 2014, nine Uyghurs were killed by Kyrgyz border guards when they attempted to cross into Kyrgyzstan. Two more Uyghurs were shot in cold blood by a civilian “hunter” who claimed to have been attacked in the mountains. Kyrgyz border authorities told reporters they believed the Uyghur men were members of a “separatist organization.” The 11 men were all unarmed and no materials were ever found that would indicate a connection to militant Uyghur organizations. Despite international calls for an independent investigation into the incident, no such investigation was ever conducted. See Rachel Vandenbrink, “11 Uyghurs Killed at Kyrgyzstan Border, Triggering Call for Probe,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 24, 2014, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/kyrgyzstan-01242014175848.html>.

30 Thomas Ambrosio, “The legal framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An architecture of authoritarianism,” The Foreign Policy Centre, May 24, 2016, <https://fpc.org.uk/scoarchitecture-of-authoritarianism/>.

## 7. Interpol

China's government has also used Interpol, the world's police cooperation organization, to target Uyghurs overseas. According to Article 2 of its constitution, Interpol is committed to working "in the spirit of the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights.'" Further, Article 3 of the Interpol Constitution states that members are "strictly prohibited" from using the system to pursue criminals facing charges of a "political, racial, religious or military character." By its very design, Interpol is supposed to be politically neutral. However, China's government has increasingly been using Interpol to pursue Uyghurs abroad by issuing Red Notices against them to have them extradited.<sup>31</sup>

### **BREAKING THE BUTTERFLY UPON A WHEEL: CHINA'S APPROACH TO COUNTERTERRORISM**

The originality of this study lies in its emphasis on the international dimension of the Uyghur humanitarian crisis. While China's security crackdown in the XUAR predates both the 2014 "People's War on Terror" and "Strike Hard Against Violent Terrorism" campaigns, these have nevertheless resulted in a notable escalation in state-sanctioned violence that constitutes a distinct era in modern Uyghur history. The most glaring symbol of this intensified security sweep is the internment of some 1.8 million Turkic minorities in re-education centers.<sup>32</sup> It is the largest mass incarceration of ethnic minorities since the Second World War.<sup>33</sup> I have found no compelling evidence to suggest that China faces either a united Uyghur insurgency

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31 For more on this topic, see "China's Use of INTERPOL Exposed in New Report," *Safeguard Defenders*, November 15, 2021, <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/chinas-use-interpol-exposed-new-report>.

32 Megha Rajagopalan, Alison Killing, and Christo Buschek "Built to Last," *Buzzfeed News*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/china-new-internment-camps-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims>

33 For a detailed look into life in the camps, see the witness testimonies gathered by Ben Mauk in "Weather Reports: Voices from Xinjiang," *Believer Magazine*, October 1, 2019, <https://believermag.com/weather-reports-voices-from-xinjiang/>; and for a virtual reconstruction of the camps, see Ben Mauk "Inside Xinjiang's Prison State," *New Yorker*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/a-reporter-at-large/china-xinjiang-prison-state-uyghur-detention-camps-prisoner-testimony>

or a sustained threat of organized transnational Uyghur terrorism within the XUAR or its surrounding neighborhood—and certainly no threat that would warrant mass atrocities in the name of “stability maintenance.”<sup>34</sup>

In lock-step with mass detention, the highest levels of the CCP have overseen the implementation of policies including forced sterilization,<sup>35</sup> coerced labor, destruction of Uyghur cultural monuments,<sup>36</sup> forced resettlement of Turkic minorities to other parts of China,<sup>37</sup> forced separation of families,<sup>38</sup> and the criminalization of everyday religious customs.<sup>39</sup> These practices move far beyond counterterrorism and into the realms of cultural genocide,<sup>40</sup> by, in effect, criminalizing entire ethnic groups.<sup>41</sup> A growing

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- 34 For more on “stability maintenance” work, see Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, James Leibold, and Daria Impiombato “The Architecture of Repression: Unpacking Xinjiang’s Governance,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/architecture-repression>
- 35 Nathan Ruser and James Leibold “Family De-Planning: The Coercive Campaign to Drive Down Indigenous Birth Rates in Xinjiang,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/family-deplanning-birthrates-xinjiang>.
- 36 Nathan Ruser, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro, and Tilla Hoja “Cultural Erasure,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>
- 37 Isobel Cockerell “Revealed: New Videos Expose China’s Forced Migration of Uyghurs During the Pandemic,” *CodaStory*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/china-uyghur-migration/>
- 38 Adrian Zenz, “Break Their Roots: Evidence for China’s Parent-Child Separation in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Political Risk*, Volume 7(7), July 19 2019, <https://www.jpolorisk.com/break-their-roots-evidence-for-chinas-parent-child-separation-campaign-in-xinjiang/>
- 39 Adrian Zenz, “Brainwashing, Police Guards and Coercive Internment: Evidence From Chinese Government Documents About the Nature and Extent of Xinjiang’s ‘Vocational Training Internment Camps,” *Journal of Political Risk*, Volume 7, no. 7, July 2019, <https://www.jpolorisk.com/brainwashing-police-guards-and-coercive-internment-evidence-from-chinese-government-documents-about-the-nature-and-extent-of-xinjiang-s-vocational-training-internment-camps/>.
- 40 For more on the nature of China’s crimes against humanity, see Martin S. Flaherty, “Repression by any other name: Xinjiang and the genocide debate,” *The Diplomat*, August 3 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/repression-by-any-other-name-xinjiang-and-the-genocide-debate/>; James Leibold, “Beyond Xinjiang: Xi Jinping’s ethnic crackdown,” *The Diplomat*, May 1 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/beyond-xinjiang-xi-jinpings-ethnic-crackdown/>; Joanne Smith Finley, “Why scholars and activists increasingly fear a Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 3, (2021): 348–370.
- 41 For more on crimes against humanity being committed in the Uyghur region, see “Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots: China’s Crimes Against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/>

body of leaked government documents suggests the ultimate aim of the “People’s War” is the complete assimilation of the Uyghurs within a Han-centric model of Chinese national revival.<sup>42</sup>

China has emerged over the past 40 years as a global superpower with its domestic legitimacy centered around a fusion of market-driven economic development and single-Party technocratic governance. The narrative agenda for this project focuses on the notion of a revitalization of the Chinese nation.<sup>43</sup> The revitalization, in this telling of history, is necessary due to past grievances suffered during the “century of humiliation”—which marks the period from the First Opium War (1839) through the Japanese invasion (1937) to the rise of the CCP in 1949. According to the CCP, China needs a strong government that can address threats to its security and territorial integrity before it can become a great power in the world.<sup>44</sup> White papers by China’s government, as well as Party-media and government spokespeople, regularly insist on the need to safeguard “national unity,” “sovereignty,” and social stability” from hostile external forces.<sup>45</sup> In April 2013, the General Office of the CCP released an internal communique known as “Document No. 9” which warned that Western ideology aimed to divide China. It instructed officials to confront “Western anti-China forces and their attempt at carrying out Westernization, separatism,

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chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting

- 42 *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*, Testimony to the Uyghur Tribunal, Parliament of the United Kingdom, (November 27, 2021) (statement of Adrian Zenz), <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-Xinjiang-Papers-An-Introduction-1.pdf>.
- 43 See Gries Hays, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520244825/chinas-new-nationalism>.
- 44 See Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/china-9780195373196?cc=us&lang=en&>.
- 45 See “White Paper: Development and Progress in Xinjiang,” Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2009, [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7077515.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7077515.htm); Wang Zhen, “Maintaining unity and fighting separatism are the sacred duty of sovereign states,” China Global Television Network, May 24, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-24/Maintaining-unity-is-the-sacred-duty-of-sovereign-states-QKV9vwZMil/index.html>; “Safeguard national unity, Xi urges,” *China Daily*, November 12, 2016, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-11/12/content\\_27354289.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-11/12/content_27354289.htm).

and Color Revolutions.<sup>46</sup> Such thinking is widespread among China's security services, particularly in the XUAR. In a recent article in the *Journal of the Xinjiang Police Officers' Academy*, author Gu Liyan writes "[the West] actively cultivates 'three evil forces' organizations both within and outside China [...] and make abundant use of the Internet to permeate Xinjiang's cultural sphere and create serious violent terrorist movements."<sup>47</sup> National minorities such as the Uyghurs are viewed by Beijing as a source of vulnerability to foreign machinations. The Uyghur region is seen as especially vulnerable to security challenges due to its long history of independence, great power intervention, and interconnectivity with neighboring Central Asia (see chapter one).<sup>48</sup> Indeed, while ethnic minorities comprise a small fraction of the country's total population, they inhabit a majority of its territory (six percent and 64 percent, respectively).<sup>49</sup>

Increasingly, China's Party-state views Uyghurs both domestically and abroad as being at odds with its global agenda. This sentiment was made explicit at the highest levels of the ruling Communist Party when General Secretary Xi Jinping gave a secret speech in the XUAR in 2014 in which he singled out Uyghurs as a threat to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>50</sup> This ideological shift has taken a marked turn in recent years with the ascent of assimilationist "second-generation" minority policies.<sup>51</sup> First proposed

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46 Julia Famularo, "Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers': The Chinese Communist Party's Counter-Terrorism Policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions*, ed. Michael Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190922610.003.0002.

47 Famularo, "Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers': The Chinese Communist Party's Counter-Terrorism Policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region."

48 Since 2015, Party officials have been instructed to study the collapse of the Soviet Union, revealing the insecurity of the current Party-state. See "200 county party secretaries went to Beijing to 'go to school': They watch historical documentaries about the collapse of the Soviet Union in the evening [200县委书记进京"上学记": 晚上看苏东剧变等历史剧]," Beijing News [新京报] via Xinhua Net [新华网], January 16, 2015, <https://archive.is/OVlvr>.

49 Cheng Li, *Ethnic Minority Elites in China's Party-State Leadership: An Empirical Assessment*, China Leadership Monitor, no. 25, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2016), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/summer\\_china\\_li.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/summer_china_li.pdf).

50 Zenz, testimony on *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*.

51 James Leibold, "Toward a Second Generation of Ethic Policies?" *China Brief* 12, no. 13, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, July 6, 2012), <https://jamestown.org/program/>

in 2011 by Chinese officials Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe, second-generation minority policies urge the Party-state to abandon its Soviet-influenced model of granting ethnic privilege and distinction in favor of a “melting pot” approach that emphasizes a unified sense of culture and identity centered on Han nationalism.<sup>52</sup> This agenda has become a key component of Xi Jinping’s national revitalization strategy and under his leadership, the Party-state has emphasized Chinese-language education over local languages like Uyghur and Kazakh in the XUAR.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the state has rolled back minority “privileges” such as exemptions from state-mandated family-planning policies and the right to exercise their religious traditions. These policies have alienated Uyghurs, who fear for the survival of their unique way of life.

Dissent against these policies is treated with zero tolerance. In the XUAR, mass protests and unrest are understood by the Party-state not as the result of legitimate grievances, such as concerns over their economic and cultural rights, but as products of “separatist” or “extremist” impulses that must be repressed.<sup>54</sup> This representation of the Uyghur region and its people as a source of insecurity serves to legitimize massive investments in the regional security apparatus, as well as excessive state violence against the local population.<sup>55</sup> The result of these ideological and security trends has been a vicious cycle of escalating state violence and local retaliation in the XUAR since the early 1990s.

Han-centric ethno-nationalist ideology rose sharply during the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.<sup>56</sup> Throughout this period, anthropologist

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toward-a-second-generation-of-ethnic-policies/.

- 52 James Leibold, “China’s Ethnic Policy Under Xi Jinping,” *China Brief* 15, no. 20, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, October 19, 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-ethnic-policy-under-xi-jinping/>.
- 53 For more on Han nationalism under Xi Jinping, see Sarah Cook “The Battle for China’s Spirit,” Freedom House, February 2017, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FH\\_ChinasSprit2016\\_FULL\\_FINAL\\_140pages.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FH_ChinasSprit2016_FULL_FINAL_140pages.pdf)
- 54 Anand, “Colonization with Chinese characteristics: Politics of (In)security in Xinjiang and Tibet.”
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 For more on race in modern China, see Cheng Yinghong, *Discourse of Race and Rising China*, (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2019); James Leibold, “China’s minority report: When racial harmony means homogenization,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 23 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-03-23/chinas-minority-report>; Gray Tuttle, “China’s race problem: How Beijing represses minorities,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2015,

Sean Roberts argues that Beijing adopted a system of “biopolitics” centered around quarantining Uyghurs from broader society.<sup>57</sup> This was especially noteworthy in the Chinese capital, where as many as 4,000 Uyghurs were removed from their homes prior to the Games and many others were denied accommodation in the city due to new ethnic profiling measures.<sup>58</sup> These policies resulted in widespread disillusionment among Uyghurs in the XUAR. Several violent incidents occurred in the Uyghur region around this time, prompting security services to detain an unprecedented 1,300 people that year on charges of committing “state security crimes.”<sup>59</sup>

Growing police presence, ethnic discrimination, and overwhelming socio-economic disparities eventually boiled over in the Uyghur capital Ürümqi on July 5, 2009, unleashing the worst instability the region has seen in its modern history. That summer, state violence against peaceful protesters sparked mass riots that ended with Uyghur and Han vigilantes murdering one another in the streets. Official government reports listed the number of deaths as 197 and continue to claim that most of the deceased were Han. The real figures appear to have been much higher. Further, there has been little official explanation as to why thousands of Uyghurs, mostly young men, disappeared in the weeks and months following the violence.<sup>60</sup> The government imposed a draconian six-month internet and telecommunications blackout on the region in the immediate aftermath of the unrest. By the time of the one-year anniversary of the violence, the Uyghur capital was blanketed with 40,000 security cameras.<sup>61</sup> The most important legacy of Ürümqi in 2009 was to be the government’s framing of the events as “China’s 9/11.” The Party-state began policing Uyghur culture and religion as a means of enhancing the legitimacy of its role in protecting the

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<https://www.jstor.org/stable/i24483558>.

57 Sean Roberts, “The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs,” *Critical Asian Studies* 50, no.2, (March 2018): 232–258, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14672715.2018.1454111>.

58 Roberts, “The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs.”

59 Ibid.

60 “‘We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them’: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang’s Protests,” Human Rights Watch, October 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/xinjiang1009webwcover.pdf>.

61 “China Puts Urumqi under ‘Full Surveillance,’” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/25/china-urumqi-under-full-surveillance>.

Han people from “terrorism.”<sup>62</sup> Scholars have shown that throughout the violence of 2009, Party-media represented the Uyghurs through racialized tropes of criminality and terrorism while parroting GWOT rhetoric.<sup>63</sup> These tropes continue to permeate Chinese society.<sup>64</sup>

Since the events in Ürümchi, the escalatory dynamics of government repression and violent backlash have grown more severe. The following is a list of key incidents the government has attributed to international terrorist networks:

**June 26, 2013 (XUAR):** 35 people were reportedly killed in an altercation between Uyghurs and police in the town of Lukqun. Local security services blamed the incident on a 17-member “terrorist cell.”<sup>65</sup>

**October 28, 2013 (Beijing):** an SUV drove into a crowd of tourists and burst into flames on Tiananmen Square, killing the three occupants, as well as two pedestrians.<sup>66</sup>

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62 This report follows Sean Roberts’ definition, by which terrorist attacks are premeditated acts of violence that deliberately target innocent civilians, who had no direct connection to the political grievances of those who carried out the attacks.

63 Brandon Barbour and Reece Jones, “Criminals, Terrorists, and Outside Agitators: Representational Tropes of the ‘Other’ in the 5 July Xinjiang, China Riots,” *Geopolitics* 18, no. 1, (2012): 95–114, DOI:10.1080/14650045.2012.691140.

64 See Darren Byler “‘Uyghurs Are So Bad’: Chinese Dinner Table Politics in Xinjiang,” *SupChina*, June 3, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/06/03/uyghurs-are-so-bad-chinese-dinner-table-politics-in-xinjiang/>

65 According to reporting by *The Economist*, the violence was a spontaneous response to restrictions on religious practice. In Turpan prefecture, where Lukqun is located, police persuaded Uyghur women to abandon their traditional clothing and men to shave their beards. Even the manufacture and sale of certain Islamic clothing items were clamped down on, putting many people out of business. In neighborhoods with high compliance, residents were given preferential access to loans and subsidies. Party-media blamed Syrian militant factions for the attack. According to the *Global Times*, “elements from ‘East Turkestan’ [in Syria] have identified candidates to sneak into Chinese territory to plan and execute terrorist attacks.” This was the first time Beijing had pointed to instability in the Middle East as a threat to Chinese national security and became a growing theme in CCP discourse. For more on this see “Ethnic Unrest in Xinjiang: Unveiled Threats,” *The Economist*, July 6, 2013, <https://www.economist.com/china/2013/07/06/unveiled-threats>; “Chinese Media Blames Syrian Rebels for Xinjiang Violence,” *Reuters*, July 1, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-xinjiang-idINDEE96004020130701?edition-redirect=in>.

66 “China to Try Eight People Over Deadly Tiananmen Attack,” *BBC*, May 31, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27647842>.

**March 1, 2014 (Yunnan):** eight people with machetes attacked passengers at the Kunming train station, killing 31 and injuring 141.<sup>67</sup>

**April 30, 2014 (XUAR):** two assailants detonated explosives at Ürümchi's train station and attacked people with knives.<sup>68</sup>

**May 22, 2014 (XUAR):** five attackers threw explosives into a crowded market in Ürümchi, killing 39 and wounding dozens more.<sup>69</sup>

**July 28, 2014 (XUAR):** 100 people were killed and over 200 arrested following a “premeditated terrorist attack” on a police station in Elishqu.<sup>70</sup>

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67 In a display of the ethnic tensions that drive such violence, police were immediately dispatched to Uyghur neighborhoods in Kunming, interrogating civilians at gunpoint. Reporting by U.S. government-sponsored *Radio Free Asia* suggested the Kunming attackers had been attempting to flee China into neighboring Laos but heightened border security had blocked their exit. *RFA* suggested the attacks were an act of “desperation,” noting that the suspects had fled from Hanerik Township, where Chinese police had opened fire on a crowd of unarmed Uyghur protesters, killing 15. Uyghur organizations around the world were quick to condemn the group’s actions. See James Pomfret and Michael Martina, “China Train Station Attacks Risks Driving Ethnic Wedge Deeper,” *Reuters*, March 3, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-attack-idUSBREA220Z120140303>; “China Train Station Attackers May Have Acted ‘In Desperation,’” *Radio Free Asia*, March 3, 2014, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/desperate-03032014224353.html>; “WUC Condemns Kunming Violence and Calls for Calm,” World Uyghur Congress, March 3, 2014, <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wuc-condemns-kunming-violence-and-calls-for-calm/>.

68 Michael Forsythe, “Assailants Attack Train Station in Restive Western China,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/01/world/asia/blast-hits-railway-station-in-restive-western-china.html>.

69 “Urumqi Attack Kills 31 in China’s Xinjiang Region,” *BBC*, May 23, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27502652>.

70 Chinese security services had reportedly opened fire on peaceful protesters, killing dozens and injuring hundreds more in Elishqu Township. At the time, the Uyghur American Association, quoting anonymous sources, said the demonstrations were a response to police restrictions on religious activity during Ramadan and the extrajudicial killing of a Uyghur family on July 18 in neighboring Bashkent Township. Police said the protesters had committed unspecified “acts of terror.” Although Party-media put the death toll at 59, some human rights organizations have cited figures as high as 2,000. The reality of what transpired remains unknown and Elishqu underwent an intense media shutdown in the aftermath, with many bloggers arrested. In total, at least 98 violent incidents were reported to involve Uyghurs, Han civilians, and local security services across China in 2013 and 2014, resulting in between 656 and 715 deaths. See “UHRP Remembers the 2014 Mass Killing of Uyghurs in Elishqu,” Uyghur Human Rights Project, July 27,

**September 18, 2015 (XUAR):** at least 50 people, most of them Han Chinese, were killed in an attack on a coal mine in Aksu County by knife-wielding assailants.<sup>71</sup>

These incidents have combined to intensify China's conflict with the Uyghurs, with political violence spilling beyond the borders of the XUAR

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2020, <https://uhrp.org/statement/uhrp-remembers-the-2014-mass-killing-of-uyghurs-in-elishqu-east-turkistan/>; "World Uyghur Congress Condemns the Violence and Mass Killings of Uyghur Civilians Perpetrated by Chinese Police and Military Forces," World Uyghur Congress, August 5, 2014, <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/23170/>; "Xinjiang Authorities Shut Down Internet After Deadly Riots," International Federation of Journalists, August 1, 2014, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/xinjiang-authorities-shut-down-internet-after-deadly-riot.html>; *Legitimizing Repression: China's 'War on Terror' Under Xi Jinping and State Policy in East Turkestan*, (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project, March 3, 2015): 7, <https://uhrp.org/report/legitimizing-repression-chinas-war-terror-under-xi-jinping-and-state-policy-east/>.

- 71 The incident was reported by foreign media but went unreported in state media for almost two months. Party media eventually declared the attack to be the work of "foreign terrorist networks" and the official death toll was reported as 16 people, including 5 police officers. The details surrounding the aftermath are vague and propagandistic. Security services announced they had been undergoing a 56-day manhunt to track down a group of 28 "terrorists" to their mountain hideout where 10,000 local volunteers had supposedly aided police by forming an "inescapable dragnet"—a claim likely intended both to project power and demonstrate civic unity. Local Party mouthpiece *Xinjiang Daily* claimed that the "28 thugs were annihilated," with apparently no attempts to arrest them. Later the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, the official outlet of China's armed forces, claimed that the knife-wielding terrorists were killed by special forces officers armed with flamethrowers. The motivations of these "thugs" and "terrorists" remain unknown. Sean Roberts noted that Uyghurs he interviewed from the region attributed the violence to local land disputes. But the state narrative of jihadist violence won out and the securitization of the XUAR had drastic consequences for the region's inhabitants. In the period 2013–2017, there were 330,918 arrests in the province (7.3 percent of China's total arrests) compared to 81,443 arrests in the five years prior to 2013. See Shohret Hoshur, "Death Toll in Xinjiang Coal Mine Attack Climbs to 50," *Radio Free Asia*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/attack-09302015174319.html>; Michael Martina and Ben Blanchard, "China Says 28 Foreign-led 'Terrorists' Killed After Attack on Mine," *Reuters*, November 19, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-xinjiang/china-says-28-foreign-led-terrorists-killed-after-attack-on-mine-idUSKCN0T909920151120>; "China Forces Use Flamethrower to Hunt 'Terrorists': Army Newspaper," *Reuters*, November 23, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-xinjiang/china-forces-used-flamethrower-to-hunt-xinjiang-terrorists-army-newspaper-idUSKBN0TC0QT20151123>; Sean Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 181; "Criminal Arrests in Xinjiang Account for 21 Percent of China's Total in 2017," Chinese Human Rights Defenders, July 25, 2018, <https://www.nchr.org/2018/07/criminal-arrests-in-xinjiang-account-for-21-of-chinas-total-in-2017/>.

for the first time. Moreover, these incidents show a shift to indiscriminate attacks against civilians over the period from 2013 to 2016. The Chinese state has increasingly pointed to Uyghurs in Syria as a source of instability, as well as in Southeast Asia where Uyghurs have been arrested in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia for extremism.<sup>72</sup> In 2017, leaders of militant groups in the MENA, including some affiliated with Al-Qaeda and IS, issued ominous statements indicating a desire to target China, Russia, and the U.S., accompanied by sometimes lengthy propaganda videos of training exercises and beheadings.<sup>73</sup> More recently, analysts have drawn attention to a series of leaked speeches by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping during his April 2014 tour of the Uyghur region. In particular, they note his warning: “after the United States pulls troops out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate into Central Asia. East Turkestan’s terrorists who have received real-war training in Syria and Afghanistan could at any time launch terrorist attacks in Xinjiang.”<sup>74</sup> There is little credible evidence of Syrian Uyghur networks establishing a prominent base in either Central Asia or Afghanistan, let alone within the heavily policed Uyghur region.<sup>75</sup> Since August 2021, the Taliban has been cooperating with China’s government to monitor Uyghur communities residing in Afghan territory, closing off any potential geographic or political space for Uyghur militants to project influence.<sup>76</sup> The Taliban has also

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72 “Is There A Uyghur Terrorist Buildup Taking Place in Southeast Asia?” *Time*, December 28, 2015, <https://time.com/4161906/uighur-terrorism-indonesia-thailand-islam-isis/>

73 “Uyghur Fighters Vow ‘Blood Will Flow in Rivers,’ in Xinjiang,” *Reuters*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-china/uighur-is-fighters-vow-blood-will-flow-in-rivers-in-china-idUSKBN16848H>.

74 Ramzy and Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims.”

75 Recent studies have even shown that when violent attacks have risen globally, they have actually declined in the XUAR. There is little correlation between external violence and internal stability in the Uyghur region. See Ji Yeon Hong and Wenhui Yang “Conditional Cross-border Effects of Terrorism in China,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, December 27, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/07388942211062840>

76 Bradley Jardine and Robert Evans, “*Nets Cast From the Earth to the Sky*”: *China’s Hunt for Pakistan’s Uyghurs*, (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project and the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, August 11, 2021), <https://uhrp.org/report/nets-cast-from-the-earth-to-the-sky-chinas-hunt-for-pakistans-uyghurs/>.

been moving ethnic Uyghurs, allegedly affiliated with TIP, away from the Chinese border according to neighboring Tajikistan's recent intelligence reports.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, the existence of small-scale Uyghur militancy has brought great danger to ordinary Uyghurs, who are now being pursued across the world and indiscriminately labeled as "terrorists" putting them and their families in peril.

Beijing's current policy trajectory of state-backed violence against the Uyghur community will only serve to further alienate the peoples of the XUAR. Moreover, China's campaign to "Sinicize" Islam and stifle Uyghur religious practices is making it a target for global jihadist movements with no connection to the Uyghurs.<sup>78</sup> China's Party-state is pursuing an incredibly high-risk strategy that is putting its citizens in danger. There are currently thousands of Chinese nationals living in countries with active terrorist networks, including 3,000 in Mali, 65,000 in Nigeria, and more than 10,000 each in Iraq and Pakistan.<sup>79</sup>

In Pakistan, three attacks against Chinese citizens occurred in 2021 alone, including the bombing of a hotel in Quetta targeting the Chinese ambassador, a bus explosion in Kohistan, and the shooting of a vehicle in Karachi that was transporting Chinese engineers.<sup>80</sup> This bodes ill for Beijing's global ambitions. In his 2014 secret speech, General Secretary Xi asserted that the BRI, his signature foreign policy project, requires a stable domestic security environment and that China's national security and the achievement of its major goals in the 21st century are in jeopardy if the situation in the XUAR cannot be brought under control. This control,

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77 Reid Standish, "Taliban 'Removing' Uyghur Militants From Afghan Border With China," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-uyghurs-china/31494226.html>.

78 Emily Feng, "China is Removing Domes From Mosques as Part of a Push to Make Them More 'Chinese,'" *National Public Radio*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/24/1047054983/china-muslims-sinicization>.

79 Matthieu Ducatel, "Terror Overseas: Understanding China's Evolving Counter-Terror Strategy," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2016, [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR\\_193\\_-\\_TERROR\\_OVERSEAS\\_UNDERSTANDING\\_CHINAS\\_EVOLVING\\_COUNTER\\_TERROR\\_STRATEGY.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR_193_-_TERROR_OVERSEAS_UNDERSTANDING_CHINAS_EVOLVING_COUNTER_TERROR_STRATEGY.pdf)

80 Sophia Saifi and Helen Regan, "Four Killed in a Car Bombing Outside Pakistan Hotel Where Chinese Ambassador Was Reportedly Staying," *CNN*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/21/asia/pakistan-bomb-blast-chinese-ambassador-intl-hnk/index.html>.

according to Xi, would only be possible if terrorism were “nipped in the bud.”<sup>81</sup> But China’s security measures are making BRI-linked projects and overseas Chinese nationals alike a growing target for jihadists.<sup>82</sup> Fixation on Uyghurs has left the country vulnerable. While the Pakistani Taliban and Balochistan separatist groups have attacked Chinese citizens, no credible South Asia operation has ever been connected to Uyghur militant groups.<sup>83</sup>

Domestically, the patterns of state violence and local retaliation are likely to increase under China’s current plans for the region. Throughout the XUAR’s history, Uyghurs have feared for their culture in the face of settler-colonial development models advanced by Beijing, and this anxiety will only increase. In the same secret speech issued to XUAR officials, Xi Jinping argued that “population proportion and population security are important foundations for long-term peace and stability.”<sup>84</sup> Other leaked materials highlighted “severe imbalances in the distribution of the ethnic population” and a “severely monoethnic” population structure, implying an overconcentration of Uyghurs living in the south of the XUAR.<sup>85</sup> The proposed remedy to this “problem” is to bring 300,000 more Han settlers to the Uyghur region by the end of 2022. Compounding this re-engineering of local demographics is a set of performance targets issued by Xinjiang’s Health Commission in 2019 to reduce Uyghur birth rates by “at least 4 [children] per mile.”<sup>86</sup>

Following these policy decisions, Beijing’s campaign of repression in the XUAR will likely increase domestic instability while putting overseas

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81 Zenz, testimony on *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*; “6 Revealing Details from Leaked Secret Documents About China’s Xinjiang Crackdown,” *VICE News*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93bbd5/china-xi-jinping-xinjiang-uyghur-speech-leak-china>.

82 “Why China is Becoming a Target of Jihadist Hatred, Like the U.S.,” *South China Morning Post*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3100914/why-china-becoming-target-jihadist-hatred-us>.

83 Ducatel, “Terror Overseas: Understanding China’s Evolving Counter-Terror Strategy.”

84 *Ibid.*

85 Zenz, testimony on *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*.

86 Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP’s Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birth Rates in Xinjiang*, (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, June 2020), <https://jamestown.org/product/sterilizations-iuds-and-mandatory-birth-control-the-ccps-campaign-to-suppress-uyghur-birthrates-in-Xinjiang/>

Chinese nationals abroad at risk of retaliation from disparate militant movements it is ill-equipped to counteract.

## STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

I divide the following study of transnational repression into two parts. In part one, I explore the origins of the Uyghur region and the complex socio-economic forces which have shaped regional identities. In chapter one, I explore the historical roots of China's engagement with the lands that form today's XUAR, tracing this engagement up to 20th-century imperialism and how various British, Russian, Chinese, and even regional systems have competed for dominance over this strategic part of the world. The chapter also traces the institutional mechanisms that underpin today's XUAR and how CCP ideology has sought to re-engineer Uyghur culture and society in line with the CCP's political objectives.

In part two, I turn to the evolution of the Party-state's system of transnational repression and explore its development using post-Soviet Central Asia, South Asia, the MENA, and the liberal-democratic world as case studies of its emergent mechanisms of intimidation and surveillance. This study argues that the Chinese government's conflict in the Uyghur region has gone global and that Beijing's over-fixation on minorities has shaped and continues to shape its engagement with the international community. In chapter two, I show how transnational repression of the Uyghurs began as a project to stifle Uyghur activism in the newly emerged post-Soviet states of Central Asia. In chapter three, I argue that the U.S.-led GWOT created new opportunities for China's government to expand its Uyghur dragnet into South Asia. Chapter four, meanwhile, looks to China's engagement with the Middle East and the economic and political ties it has fostered to encourage regional cooperation in monitoring and deporting the Uyghur diaspora. Lastly, in chapter five, I argue that cyberspace has become the new frontier for transnational repression, creating ample opportunities at a low cost for the Party-state to intimidate activists in the democratic world. The study concludes with a number of policy recommendations to counteract China's global campaign of repression.

## PART ONE

# Defining Xinjiang

**THE UYGHUR REGION** sits at the crossroads of East, South, and Central Asia; and has been contested by various empires—some foreign and some local—throughout its history. China’s governing of this part of the world is a relatively recent phenomenon, having begun with the Qing Dynasty’s incorporation of the region as an official province named “Xinjiang” (New Frontier) in 1884. This frontier has continued to play an outsized role in shaping events both within and outside China’s borders.

Much ink has been spilled on “borderlands” like the Uyghur region and the ways in which they foment ethnic conflict<sup>1</sup> and violence.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have also noted the complex problems such territories pose for modern nation-building projects.<sup>3</sup> Three aspects of modern borderlands make them particularly challenging to govern. First, they tend to attract ideologues who seek to defend the state and others who seek to defy it for a variety of often overlapping motivations. Second, borders tend to polarize these two groups of actors by amplifying perceived differences between them, political threats, and social distinctions. Finally, frontiers empower non-state actors by providing ample opportunity to leverage structures beyond national borders, including via support from foreign governments, or linkages to international smuggling routes, among other examples.

As we will see in the chapter that follows, each of these trends has

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- 1 Daniel Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
  - 2 Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
  - 3 Christopher Paik and Jessica Vechbanyongratana, “Path to centralization and development: evidence from Siam,” *World Politics* 71, (April 2019): 289–331, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/abs/path-to-centralization-and-development-evidence-from-siam/ADEB6B15346131BF0BA8BA728B4D61C7>.

played out in the Uyghur region's long history and has served to shape the cycle of violence today. Various Chinese state projects from the Qing to the PRC have treated the largely-Turkic inhabitants of the Uyghur region with suspicion. Marked as "potentially disloyal" by the Qing in the 19th century, the central government began using Han settlers to systematically negate any sense of Turkic unity and project the institutions of Qing power into the region. Such colonial impulses have only been enhanced since the 1949 ascent of the Chinese Communist Party to power. The means used by the Party-state toward this end—such as tight restrictions on religious or cultural practices and encouragement of Han settlement—have served to generate ethnic minority discontent. Even today, in a series of recently leaked speeches by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2014, shifting the demographic balance in Uyghur majority parts of the XUAR was characterized as a national security issue.<sup>4</sup>

The key colonizing force tasked with maintaining Han ascendancy has been the agricultural paramilitary organization the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), founded in 1954.<sup>5</sup> The organization still remains a driving factor in much of the unrest in the Uyghur region.<sup>6</sup> As of 2018, the XPCC has some 2.68 million people under its command and accounts for around 17 percent of the XUAR's total GDP output. Increasingly, the XPCC has become a key component of the mass internment program and has taken a leading role in implementing Uyghur forced labor programs in the cotton fields under its control, and production facilities linked to international textile companies.<sup>7</sup>

Border regions also play an important role in shaping the identities of local populations by hardening social fault lines<sup>8</sup> and increasing the

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4 Zenz, testimony on *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*.

5 For more on the individual motivations of the Han settlers themselves, see Tom Cliff, *Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/O/bo23151172.html>.

6 For more on the XPCC's operations in the XUAR today, see Amy Lehr "Addressing Forced Labor In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Toward a Shared Agenda," CSIS, July 30, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/addressing-forced-labor-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-toward-shared-agenda>

7 David Lawder and Dominique Patton, "U.S. Bans Cotton Imports From China Producer XPCC Citing Xinjiang 'Slave Labor,'" *Reuters*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china/u-s-bans-cotton-imports-from-china-producer-xpcc-citing-xinjiang-slave-labor-idUSKBN28C38V>.

8 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

perception of threats.<sup>9</sup> In the Uyghur region, China has been wary of transborder connections between its inhabitants and the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Throughout the Cold War, significant territory along the Sino-Soviet border was depopulated and resettled with Han migrants connected to the XPCC to limit these connections. Today, technology is employed to sever these same ties. Since 2017, the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau, under direction of the PLAC, has been operating blacklists of countries in Central Asia and the wider Muslim world. Uyghurs with connections to these countries are sent to re-education centers (see part two). In addition, China's border guards have been installing surveillance software on the electronic devices of anyone crossing from Central Asia into the XUAR.<sup>10</sup>

The XUAR appears relatively unique within China. While other borderlands such as Inner Mongolia have experienced similar colonial dynamics and cultural suppression, these factors have failed to produce the same degree of violence and state insecurity as the Uyghur region. Historically, great power support for Uyghur state projects and diaspora activism has been a consistent theme and has fed into China's perceptions of the region as marred by foreign interference. Border regions provide local elites and subnational actors with strategies to leverage overlapping local and cross-border authority structures.<sup>11</sup> As the Sino-Soviet alliance began to sour in the late 1950s, Moscow began to inflame separatist aspirations in some segments of Uyghur society—even going so far as to permit the creation of a variety of militant organizations on Soviet territory.

These dynamics have all coalesced to forge not only a proud sense of an independent political culture among the Uyghurs but an exaggerated threat perception among Chinese officials. Today, “foreign machinations” are often attributed to Western actors. Party documents regularly accuse the United States of creating linkages between Uyghurs

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Press, 2010).

- 9 Fredrik Barth, “Boundaries and connections,” in *Signifying Identities*, ed. A. Cohen, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge Press, 2012), 25–44.
- 10 Hilary Osborne and Sam Cutler, “Chinese Border Guard Put Secret Surveillance Apps on Tourists’ Phones,” *Guardian*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/02/chinese-border-guards-surveillance-app-tourists-phones>
- 11 Anthony Asiwaju, “Borderlands in Africa: a comparative research perspective with particular reference to Western Europe,” *Journal of Borderland Studies* 8, (1993): 1–12.

and “international terror organizations.” In April 2021, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a document listing a long history of supposed Western attempts to fund Uyghur terror and destabilize China.<sup>12</sup> The official document states that “U.S. and British intelligence agencies supported Pan-Turkism in order to weaken Russia and China and serve their agenda of maintaining a unipolar world.”<sup>13</sup> The statement singles out World Uyghur Congress and the East Turkestan Government-in-Exile as “extremist” and accuses the National Endowment for Democracy of indirectly funding the spread of “radical ideas” in the XUAR.<sup>14</sup> It goes on to accuse the Central Intelligence Agency of mobilizing “Uyghur diaspora groups” to spread misinformation about China. Other accusations include “evidence” that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to destabilize China, the U.S. arms and trains Al-Qaeda and IS operatives, and that the NGO Xinjiang Victims Database is the work of “anti-China forces.”<sup>15</sup> The transnational repression of the Uyghurs should be understood as an extension of the Party-state’s campaign to deny Uyghur agency and the ability to express legitimate grievances.

The following section explores China’s relationship with the Turkic peoples of the Uyghur region throughout history and present-day governance methods as they have evolved over time. This chapter offers a chronological history of the region, subdivided into six key thematic frameworks through which various actors have conceptualized what is today known as the XUAR: strategic buffer; national idea; political project; nested hierarchy; settler-colonial outpost, and strategic asset. Each of these frameworks has had profound consequences for the people of the XUAR.

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12 “Things to know About all the Lies on Xinjiang: How Have They Come About?” Embassy of the Chinese People’s Republic in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, April 28, 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegyj/eng/zgyw/t1872249.htm>.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

## CHAPTER ONE

# China's Islamic Frontier

**“Empires arise from chaos, and empires collapse back into chaos.  
This we have known since times began.”**

Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

**IN THE TOWN** of Hotan in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the night sky is pierced intermittently by local police patrol vehicles' red and blue lights. At dawn, traditional Islamic calls to prayer have been replaced by a patriotic song blasted from loudspeakers in Mandarin: “Without The Communist Party, There Would Be No New China.”

On Unity Square, searchlights beam on an imposing statue of China's mercurial former leader, Mao Zedong, whose large bronze hand is clasped tightly around those of Uyghur farmer Kurban Tulum. According to Communist Party propaganda, “Uncle Kurban” was a peasant working under harsh conditions until the PLA marched into the Uyghur region and liberated it from greedy landlords. Kurban was so overwhelmed with gratitude that he purportedly rode out to the regional capital Ürümchi on the back of a donkey to show his appreciation to the new Communist authorities. Kurban was brought to Beijing later as part of a 1958 delegation. His meeting with the Chairman has since become a recurring symbol of national unity between the Uyghur and Han peoples in Party-media.

The statue has also acted as a target for resistance. In March 2009, Hotan's Municipal Court sentenced protester Mamatali Ahat to eight years in prison for raising the sky-blue flag of East Turkestan, a symbol of pride for many Uyghurs and a designated symbol of terrorism for China's government, above the statue.<sup>1</sup> Today, the distinctive red and gold warning signs

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1 “Uyghur to be Tried for Reporting ‘Fatal’ Beating,” *South China Morning Post*, March 18, 2009, <https://www.scmp.com/article/673674/uygur-be-tried-reporting-fatal-beating>.

of the Party are displayed nearby: “Distorting history is a criminal offense.” A trove of classified government documents leaked in November 2021 emphasizes the centrality of historical narratives as a mechanism of control in the region. The “Xinjiang Papers” instructed officials to “resolutely eliminate the influence of erroneous thoughts in Xinjiang’s history, culture, ethnicity, and religion” in order to “lay a solid ideological and political foundation for governing Xinjiang.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Uyghur region, history has become both a weapon to pacify the region and an expression of dissent. Faced with religious and cultural repression, discrimination, and imprisonment, many Uyghurs have grown to resent the rule of Beijing. But beneath these harsh realities of everyday life in the region is a more fundamental question of legitimacy. Beijing’s authority in the area is a relatively recent phenomenon, spurred in part by the expansion of European powers along the Qing Empire’s frontiers. Nevertheless, virtually every official document concerning the Uyghur region published in China since 1949 begins with the line: “Xinjiang has since ancient times been an inseparable part of China.”<sup>3</sup>

Around the world, China is embarking on a campaign of transnational repression unprecedented in scope that targets Uyghur communities who challenge Beijing’s official narrative for the region. The China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset I developed alongside this report in partnership with the Uyghur Human Rights Project and the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, contains 5,532 cases of Uyghurs facing intimidation overseas, 1,150 cases of Uyghurs detained in their host country and 424 cases of Uyghurs deported, extradition, or rendered back to China. On college campuses around the world, Uyghurs have been prevented from giving lectures and students say they are careful about who they reveal their backgrounds to. Through United Front Work Department networks, Chinese Embassies have paid student organizations supporting the CCP’s narrative on the Uyghur region (see chapter five).<sup>4</sup> The global

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2 Zenz, testimony on *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*.

3 James Millward and Peter Purdue, *Political and Cultural History of the Xinjiang Region Through the Late 19th Century*, cited in Frederick Starr, *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*, (London: Routledge Press, 2004), 48, <https://www.routledge.com/Xinjiang-Chinas-Muslim-Borderland/Starr/p/book/9780765613189>.

4 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “China’s Long Arm Reaches Into American Campuses,”

clampdown has been accompanied by a coordinated propaganda campaign that paints China as the victim of both violent extremism and Western misinformation. In April 2021, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a document listing a long history of supposed Western attempts to fund Uyghur terror and destabilize China.<sup>5</sup> It goes on to accuse the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation of mobilizing "Uyghur diaspora groups" to spread misinformation about China.

The focus on controlling history both abroad and domestically becomes clearer when analyzed alongside the government's targeting of Uyghur intellectuals in the XUAR since 2017.<sup>6</sup> According to a recent report on eliticide by Uyghur Human Rights Project, some 312 public intellectuals and leading cultural figures in the XUAR are currently detained in re-education centers, including folklore expert Rahile Dawut, Xinjiang University President Tashpolat Teyip, and scholar Adbduqadir Jalleddin.<sup>7</sup> The CCP has issued harsh sentences to those who stray from its tightly controlled narrative on the region, including banning local history textbooks and punishing their authors.<sup>8</sup> In April 2021, Uyghur historian Sattar Sawut was sentenced to death for publishing a textbook that praised the 1940s Uyghur resistance movement that established an independent Uyghur statelet in

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*Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/07/chinas-long-arm-reaches-into-american-campuses-chinese-students-scholars-association-university-communist-party/>.

- 5 "Things to know About all the Lies on Xinjiang: How Have They Come About?" Embassy of the Chinese People's Republic in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, April 28, 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegy//eng/zgyw/t1872249.htm>.
- 6 For more on how the Party-state has targeted Uyghur poets, see Lily Kuo "Poetry, the Soul of Uyghur Culture, on Verge of Extinction in Xinjiang," *Guardian*, December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/06/poetry-the-soul-of-uyghur-culture-on-verge-of-extinction-in-xinjiang>; for an example of how the state has targeted monuments to Uyghur scholars, see Bahram Sintash "Xinjiang Authorities Remove Statue of Revered Uyghur Scholar Mahmut Kashgary," *Radio Free Asia*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/scholar-12022020185652.html>
- 7 *The Disappearance of Uyghur Intellectuals and Cultural Elites: A New Form of Eliticide*, (Uyghur Human Rights Project: Washington, DC, December 8, 2021), <https://uhrp.org/report/the-disappearance-of-uyghur-intellectual-and-cultural-elites-a-new-form-of-elicide/>.
- 8 Dake Kang "Xinjiang Banished Textbooks," *AP*, September 3, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/religion-ap-top-news-international-news-pa-state-wire-china-4f5f57213e3546ab9bd1be01dfb510d3>

1944 known as the Second East Turkestan Republic (see page 20). Referred to as the “Three Districts Revolution” in Party propaganda, the uprising had long been praised by the CCP as part of its broader struggle against the Chinese Nationalist government in Nanjing. Since 2014 however, the Uyghur republic has been vilified in official historiography and accused of committing “the grave mistake of ethnic division.”<sup>9</sup>

This chapter aims to show how the historical grievances of the Uyghurs have created a deep sense of insecurity among Chinese officials. This vulnerability, compounded by the growth of Uyghur diaspora communities and transnational digital activism, has spurred a counter-campaign of global repression by the CCP in a bid to sanitize the international narrative about its policies in the Uyghur region. The chronology that follows adopts the perspective that China’s relationship with the Uyghurs can best be described as colonial in nature and it is this dynamic that is driving instability. Multiple Chinese state projects from the Qing Dynasty to the PRC have characterized the Uyghurs and other Turkic indigenous groups as being inferior to the Han population. This civilizing narrative is a common theme in the literature on colonialism and continues to shape official policy in the region today—most noticeably through a state-mandated campaign of cultural “re-education.” Unlike colonial empires of the past, China has refused to undergo a meaningful process of decolonization in which Uyghur and other Turkic minority cultural rights or autonomy are granted, inflaming the sense of local resentment.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, the inability of the PRC to decolonize its relationship with the Uyghurs and their homeland is driven by the fact that it has neither acknowledged its conquest and subjugation of the Uyghur region nor recognized the Uyghurs as the indigenous population of the XUAR.

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9 Huizhong Wu “A Uyghur Gets Death Sentence, As China Bans Once OK’d Books,” Associated Press, February 2, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/uyghur-death-sentence-china-banned-books-6da7d5d6ed5c9937d1a4796b3bcb94b1>

10 See the following human rights report for a detailed analysis of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and their failed realization under the PRC government: “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the Uyghurs of East Turkestan (also known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region XUAR, People’s Republic of China),” Uyghur Human rights Project, October 5, 2009, <https://uhrp.org/report/uyghurs-indigenous-people-new-uhrp-report-highlights-chinese-0/>.

## THE CLOSING OF THE STEPPE: XINJIANG AS A STRATEGIC BUFFER

China's claims to rule in the Uyghur region stretch back almost 2,000 years to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), which was based in modern-day China's Henan province.<sup>11</sup> During their rule, the Han were engaged in a strategic conflict with the Xiongnu, a confederation of Altaic-speaking tribes who controlled vast territories across Central Asia.<sup>12</sup> The sedentary Han paid tribute to the Xiongnu to keep these nomads at bay, hoping trade could avert raids into the Han heartland. The strategy proved to be a humiliating failure as raids continued despite these concessions and the Han adopted more aggressive methods.<sup>13</sup> To stop the Xiongnu in their tracks, the Han dispatched an expeditionary force in 60 AD to capture the fertile Tarim Basin and smash nomadic supply lines, reducing their ability to project power inland. Though initially successful, the collapse of the Han Dynasty brought an end to Chinese influence in the region for centuries until their frontier strategies were adopted by the Tang Dynasty (618–907), which controlled much of the Uyghur region via military garrisons.<sup>14</sup> The Tang was the last dynasty to do so for a thousand years, until the Qing Dynasty's (1644–1911) march west.<sup>15</sup>

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11 James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 18–25, <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/eurasian-crossroads/9780231139243>.

12 The Altai language is part of the Turkic language family and closely resembles Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek. For more please see Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6–7, 22.

13 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 19–25.

14 *Ibid.*, 29–39.

15 Peter Purdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674057432>.

**FIGURE 5:** Map of historical boundaries of the Han (dark yellow), Tang (red), and Qing Dynasties (broken red line), respectively. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



Official historiography conveniently ignores these ebbs and flows of Chinese influence in the region and instead stresses continuity. In 2003, China's Communist officials released a white paper titled "The History and Development of Xinjiang," which argues that the region has been an "inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation since the Han dynasty."<sup>16</sup> Despite such claims, the sprawling Uyghur region only became part of a Chinese state project following the mid-18th century Qing conquest.<sup>17</sup>

The Qing faced substantial resistance to its control of the region. In the 1860s, an uprising by Hui Muslims in Gansu cut the Uyghur region off from China and led to the rise of a new state ruled by Ya'qub Beg (1864–1877), a Khoqandi who opened diplomatic channels with the Russian, British, and

16 "History and Development of Xinjiang," *Chinese Journal of International Law* 3, no. 2, (2004): 629–659, <https://academic.oup.com/chinesejil/article-abstract/3/2/629/335782?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

17 Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/bovi14758>.

Ottoman empires.<sup>18</sup> Russian generals responded to Beg's rise by seizing the Ili Valley, controlling it from 1871 to 1881.<sup>19</sup> This decade of rebellion and unrest is often treated in Uyghur nationalist historiography as a struggle for self-determination. But this framing simplifies the complex mosaic of local motivations and grievances. Ya'qub Beg was no proto-Uyghur nationalist. He was a proud and self-motivated Khoqandi whose foreign visitors often spoke of the luxury of his court, as well as his 200 wives and concubines from every corner of the globe.<sup>20</sup> Styling himself as an Islamic warrior defending his faith from "infidels," Beg implemented a strict religious order in his fiefdom.<sup>21</sup> His officials enforced Islamic law (*shariah*) and *Qadi Ra'is* (religious judges) policed the streets, flogging any women who refused to wear their *Hijabs*.<sup>22</sup> Despite the CCP's modern-day charges that Uyghurs were part of this fanatical religious project, the majority were displeased with Beg's iron rule according to historian James Millward.<sup>23</sup> Alarmed by Russia's pre-emptive seizing of the Ili Valley to avert Beg's religious zealotry from spilling into Russian Turkestan, the Qing government dispatched an army to put down the Khoqandi state.

The defeat of Ya'qub Beg in 1877 brought profound changes to the region.<sup>24</sup> In 1884 it became an official Chinese province and was assigned the name Xinjiang, meaning "New Frontier" in Mandarin. The Qing adopted four strategies to consolidate their gains: political integration via an imperial-style administration; development of a Han Chinese ruling elite in the region; promotion of Han in-migration to change the demographic balance; and the adoption of a Confucian model of education to assimilate the local population. Qing policy also became bifurcated between a soft

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18 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 93–94.

19 Beg had tense relations with Russia, which feared the spread of his Sunni Islamic fanaticism into Russian Turkestan (today's Central Asian republics), but the two sides nevertheless signed a commercial treaty in 1872.

20 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 120–123.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 The Qing had launched their military reconquest in 1876, and Beg died on May 30, 1877, while retreating from Qing advances. For more, see Peter Purdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

pluralistic approach to integration that encouraged assimilation through a cultural flourishing and a rigid integrationist approach characterized by attempts to eliminate local cultural traditions.

## EURASIAN RENAISSANCE: XINJIANG AS A NATIONAL IDEA

The dual shocks of the 1911 collapse of the Qing Empire (Xinhai Revolution) and the 1917 Russian Revolution altered the balance of power in Eurasia. The Bolsheviks drove 40,000 Russian refugees and armed Tsarist loyalists (Whites) into the Uyghur region, which was then tenuously controlled by Beijing.<sup>25</sup> Complicating matters, China had entered into the Warlord Era (1916–1928), a time of political fragmentation and fluid alliances as regional strongmen built personal fiefdoms and weakened central government control—though some warlords, including the Uyghur region's, would remain at least somewhat loyal to Beijing.

The Uyghur region's warlord Governor Yang Zengxin began to see his province descend into a front of the Russian Civil War (1918–1921) and worried about the repercussions the conflict would have on his sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> According to historian Justin Jacobs, Yang attempted to use his limited forces to seal the borders. After a resounding military defeat, however, he opted instead to arrest and repatriate White military leaders, and permitted Soviet troops to stage an attack against Tsarist forces on his territory to build goodwill with the Soviets. Unfortunately for Yang, the Soviet assault merely pushed the Whites back into Inner Mongolia, promoting local nationalism as a weapon against the Chinese.<sup>27</sup> “For too long now, you have been wantonly abused and violently oppressed by your Han overlords,” Russian officials announced in July. “Now, I have driven them out and taken control of Altai.”<sup>28</sup> Soviet strategists began to view Central Asian

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25 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 185.

26 Justin Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017): 67–70, <https://uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295742649/xinjiang-and-the-modern-chinese-state/>.

27 Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, 116.

28 Ibid.

nationalist projects with grave concern, which resulted in proactive policies to prevent potential separatist movements on their territory.<sup>29</sup>

With the civil war winding down, Governor Yang began negotiations with the Soviet state to retain power. By March 1920, he had secured a meeting with Soviet agents in Ili, where the two sides signed the first provisional trade accord to be signed by a Chinese official in seventy years.<sup>30</sup> Crucially for Yang, the agreement would allow both sides to place “commercial representatives” in one another’s territory. Whereas the Bolsheviks merely reacquired rights granted to Tsarist Russia, Yang was gaining unprecedented economic and political access for his region.<sup>31</sup> He established a permanent representative in Semipalatinsk (present-day Kazakhstan), where the Chinese side monitored expatriates from the Uyghur region for “radical nationalist activities.”<sup>32</sup> Yang later wrote that these expatriates were an “uneducated floating population, extremely susceptible” to Soviet overtures.<sup>33</sup> Convinced of the threat of radicalization abroad, the first cable from Semipalatinsk back to the Uyghur region advised officials to “conduct thorough background checks on any future military conscripts, to avoid allowing any man who has performed seasonal hard labor abroad from filling our ranks.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite these tensions, Soviet policy in the region oriented away from ideological adventurism by the 1920s. In the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution, leading figures like Leon Trotsky argued that the Uyghur region should play a role as a critical transmission belt for the revolution through “the towns of Afghanistan, the Punjab, and Bengal” to bring London to its knees.<sup>35</sup> Realpolitik soon took precedence and Moscow instead concentrated on consolidating its rule. But Soviet ideology and radical nation-building would still resonate beyond its borders. Whereas the

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29 Palmer, *The Bloody White Baron: The Extraordinary Story of the Russian Nobleman Who Became the Last Khan of Mongolia*, 176.

30 Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, 133.

31 Ibid., 122.

32 Ibid., 138.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Peter Hopkirk, *Setting the East Ablaze: Lenin's Dream of an Empire in Asia*, (London: John Murray, 2006), [https://www.abebooks.com/products/isbn/9780719564505?cm\\_sp=bdp\\_-\\_ISBN13\\_-\\_PLP](https://www.abebooks.com/products/isbn/9780719564505?cm_sp=bdp_-_ISBN13_-_PLP).

Western allies had used nationalities discourse to dismember rival empires in the aftermath of the First World War, the Soviets had developed it as a means of inoculating itself against such dismemberment.<sup>36</sup> Leaders in Moscow theorized that promoting the cultures of national minorities and giving them a stake in local government may be the best strategy to defuse the rising tide of nationalism and ensure the unity of the Soviet state.<sup>37</sup>

Soviet actors also used their nation-building projects to influence events beyond their borders—something historian Terry Martin referred to as the “Piedmont Principle.”<sup>38</sup> In 1921, the Turkburo of the Comintern convened the Turkestan Congress of the Union of Chinese Workers in Tashkent to merge disparate Turkic revolutionary groups in Central Asia.<sup>39</sup> Uyghur region emigres were led by Abdullah Rozibaqiev, who called on attendees to liberate themselves from the “Chinese yoke,” bringing an element of anti-Chinese militancy to proceedings.<sup>40</sup> The congress included three distinct groups from the Uyghur region, the Taranchis, Dungans, and Qāshqāris, who came together for the first time under the idea of a shared Uyghur ancestry. Rozibaqiev proposed merging his organization Semireche Uyghur Club with the Union of Qāshqār and Dzungarian Workers, to form the Revolutionary Union of Altishahri and Dzungarian Workers—Uyghur. As scholar David Brophy notes, the use of “Uyghur” was not intended to denote nationality but a political organization. Indeed, official documents from the era put the term Uyghur in quotation marks to emphasize its political association.<sup>41</sup> The term Uyghur was not in widespread use in the 1920s. Still, it had been gaining traction since the closing of the steppe in the 19th century. In the 1880s, prosperous merchants from Qāshqār, Turfan, and Ili, who had traveled across Europe and Istanbul launched a campaign to

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36 Hopkirk, *Setting the East Ablaze: Lenin's Dream of an Empire in Asia*.

37 Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923–1939*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/52766>.

38 Terry Martin, “The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” *Journal of Modern History* 7, no. 4, (1998): 813–861, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/235168>.

39 David Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 173–204, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674660373>.

40 Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, 173–204.

41 Ibid.

modernize Uyghur education as part of the broader “jaddidist” movement that was taking place in Central Asia.<sup>42</sup> While these intellectuals were only a tiny, elite group, the fact that by 1913 over 50,000 seasonal laborers were traveling from the Uyghur region’s south to Central Asia every year showed that there was potential for the idea of Uyghur unity to spread.<sup>43</sup>

An official Regional Bureau of Uyghur Communist Sections was launched in March 1923 in the Uyghur region. In its reports, the section saw itself as being composed of three distinct Uyghur nations, but the existence of a unified party section implied that they would now be treated as a single entity.<sup>44</sup> Disagreements over the status of the Chinese-speaking Dungans in this coalition remained a contentious source of debate, however. In 1924, the Dungans left the three-way alliance and decided to identify as “purely Chinese.”<sup>45</sup> That same year, Soviet Turkestan was demarcated into the Soviet Socialist Republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. Autonomous oblasts were set aside for the Tajiks and Kyrgyz, which later emerged as full-fledged republics in their own right in 1929 and 1936, respectively.

Governor Yang acknowledged his need to re-establish relations with the USSR and open his province to Moscow’s influence. “We have no choice but to maintain an active relationship with the Soviet Union,” he wrote. “But their policies of governance are not welcome in Xinjiang.”<sup>46</sup> Later, Yang expressed concern regarding Soviet influence, pondering how his territory could resist ideological contamination.<sup>47</sup> The Soviets were making “aggressive use” of the Uyghur region’s ethnic minorities in the governor’s language. “In response, Chinese policy must now turn to defend against Mongols, Kazaks, Hui, and Turbans (Uyghurs).”<sup>48</sup> But Yang’s once-formidable fortress

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 182–184.

45 Ibid.

46 Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, 123.

47 Once relations were restored in 1927, the Soviets established consulates in Ghulja, Tarbaghatay, Dihua (Ürümchi), Qāshqār, and Sharasume, and the cities were opened to trade. The Uyghur region, in response, opened consulates in Almaty, Tashkent, Semipalatinsk, Andijan, and Zaisan.

48 Ibid.

was breached not from foreign powers but from within and he was assassinated by warlord rival Feng Yuxiang in 1928, setting the scene for the rise of Jin Shuren, another warlord who would prove far less politically adept at managing the affairs of the region's Muslims. Encroachments by warlords like Feng on the Uyghur region's territory also provided Yang's successors with a dilemma: to defend themselves, they must raise taxes and an army, but doing so risked alienating the local population and sparking instability.<sup>49</sup> Autocratic, corrupt, and ineffective at managing the Uyghur region's development, Jin antagonized the population with his Sinicization policies, high taxes, and prohibitions on religious practices such as the *hajj* pilgrimage, bringing his rule to an abrupt end.

## RISE AND FALL OF THE UYGHUR REPUBLICS: XINJIANG AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

An explosion of unrest culminated in the Uyghur region's population gaining their first taste of statehood. Frustration with Jin's insensitive government reached its apogee in February 1931 when a Han officer sought to marry a Uyghur girl from a village outside Hami but was refused permission. Rebellion broke out, resulting in a massacre of 33 Han soldiers who were present at the wedding. Violence spread across the cities ringing the Tarim Basin and became a general rebellion against Jin Shuren's efforts to abolish local autonomy for the peoples of the region.<sup>50</sup> By November 1933, the Turkic Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (ETR) had been proclaimed in Qäshqär in front of a crowd of 20,000 who sang: "Our flag is a blue flag, our horde is a golden horde (from *orda*, i.e., our people, our khanate), Turkestan is the homeland of our Turk people, it has become ours."<sup>51</sup> The blue flag with the white crescent and star referenced in the song as chosen as the ETR's symbol is still used worldwide by Uyghurs.

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49 Ibid.

50 Jacobs, *Xinjiang, and the Modern Chinese State*, 156.

51 Adeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History From the Imperial Conquests to the Present*, (Princeton and New York: Princeton University Press, 2021), <https://apps.crossref.org/coaccess/coaccess.html?doi=10.1515%2F9780691220437>.

**FIGURE 6:** The white and blue flag of the first East Turkestan Republic (1933–1934) remains a potent symbol of Uyghur national aspirations.



**FIGURE 7:** The territorial extent of the first East Turkestan Republic (1933–1934), in blue. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



The Islamic nature of the ETR has become a key source of dispute in modern historiography. Authorities in China tend to overestimate the influence of religion as a means of equating Uyghur nationalism with Islamic extremism.<sup>52</sup> In 2002, for example, the State Information Council issued a document arguing that “at the beginning of the twentieth century, a handful of fanatical Xinjiang separatists and extremist religious elements fabricated the myth of ‘East Turkestan’ in light of the sophistries and fallacies created by the old [European] colonialists.”<sup>53</sup> This dramatically simplifies the ambiguities of the 1933–34 East Turkestan Republic, which embraced both Islamic and modernist principles grounded in republican values.<sup>54</sup> Guiding principles included commitments to multinationalism, democracy, religious freedom (within a state committed to Islam), and the modernization of social services, among others.

But these lofty ideals fell second to the imperative of survival. Inflation quickly hit the fledgling state, causing food prices to double by December 1933.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the ETR was cast adrift between hostile Soviet and Chinese powers, lacking international recognition other than toothless shows of solidarity from Turkey.<sup>56</sup> Left vulnerable, the ETR collapsed with the 1934 sacking of Qāshqār by Ma Zhongying, a Hui Muslim warlord aligned with the nationalist GMD government in Nanjing.<sup>57</sup> Jin’s former military commander and eventual successor as governor of the Uyghur region Sheng Shicai called for Soviet aid in the north. The Japanese annexation of Manchuria the previous year and Tokyo’s rumored support for Ma Zhongyin had troubled Joseph Stalin, forcing him to intervene on behalf of Sheng.<sup>58</sup> As Ma’s troops moved to attack Dihua (Ürümchi), Soviet

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52 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 201–206.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 The ETR’s religious rhetoric raised suspicion in the Soviet Union, where authorities had just put down a rebellion led by Muslim “Basmachi” guerillas across Central Asia. Many of the leaders of this failed Soviet rebellion fled the Soviet Union and took up administrative roles within the new Uyghur state. Alarmed by the prospect of a pan-Turkic revolution across its territory, the Soviets chose to aid China in crushing the ETR.

57 Ibid.

58 Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, 254–265.

brigades armed with air support pushed the warlord back, beginning the Soviet Invasion of Xinjiang (1934) and allowing Sheng to seize power and eventually crush the last remnants of the ETR in Qāshqār.

From 1934 to 1941, the Uyghur region functioned as a Soviet satellite under the warlord Sheng Shicai who opened the province to Soviet state-owned enterprises. On consolidating his rule in 1934, Sheng committed himself to the “Six Great Policies” of anti-imperialism, peace, ethnic equality, clean government, construction, and friendship with the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup> In August that year, Sheng launched the Uyghur Enlightenment Association, officially endorsing the idea of a Uyghur nation in the region for the first time and thus embracing some of the legacies of the ETR.<sup>60</sup> To aid the new administration, Moscow dispatched members of the Han and Turkic expatriate communities in Central Asia across the border to assist Dihua (Ürümchi) in implementing Stalinist policies. These men included CCP agents who had been studying in Moscow, as well as Uyghur radicals who sought to spread Soviet-style nationalities discourse to their homeland.<sup>61</sup> Now that the Uyghur region had become a Soviet satellite, Moscow abandoned its policy of restraint and allowed Uyghur nationalists back across the border to help consolidate Sheng’s rule.

Relations between the Soviets and Sheng fragmented within three years as the warlord seized on the outbreak of the Second World War to turn against Stalin and establish ties with the Guomindang nationalists. To forge a relationship with Chiang Kai-shek, Sheng began executing CCP cadres in 1942, including Mao Zemin, the brother of Mao Zedong.<sup>62</sup> The following year, the warlord was appointed to head the GMD branch in the Uyghur region. Sheng’s luck had come to an end, however. After the Soviet victory in the Eastern Front in 1944, the warlord attempted to regain Soviet backing by sending a letter to Stalin offering to “incorporate Xinjiang into the USSR as its 18th Soviet Socialist Republic,” with Sheng

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59 Ibid.

60 Joshua Freeman, *Print and Power in the Communist Borderlands: The Rise of Uyghur National Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/42029533>.

61 Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, 194.

62 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 211.

as ruler.<sup>63</sup> Moscow forwarded the letter to Chiang Kai-shek, head of the GMD, leading to Sheng's removal from office and the GMD establishing control over the Uyghur region. Nanjing's hold over the Uyghur region proved fragile however and it descended into instability after the GMD imposed an embargo on trade with the Soviet Union in 1944. The policy was a disaster, sparking a Uyghur-Kazakh rebellion around Ghulja in the north, and a Kyrgyz rebellion in the south.<sup>64</sup> Moscow backed the northern rebellion, seeing it as an opportunity to reassert its influence. The Soviet-backed Ili National Army pushed the GMD out of its territory by the end of the year, setting the scene for the founding of the second East Turkestan Republic (ETR).<sup>65</sup>

Though Uyghurs were heavily represented in its leadership, the second ETR represented a broader set of interests than Uyghur nationalism. Today's Uyghur nationalists paint the second ETR as a national uprising that was undermined by the PLA's march into the Uyghur region. But like the first ETR, ambiguity remains over the real motivations for forming the state and its aims. It appears to have been both secular and Islamic and aimed to represent all the non-Han peoples of the region. In 1945, a handbill entitled "Why Are We Fighting?" circulated, which historians argue puts into question the very notion that the uprising was ever inspired by Islamic principles.<sup>66</sup> The document called for "an end to Chinese rule; equality for all nationalities; cultural, linguistic, and religious freedom; and restored friendship and trade relations with 'our great, freedom-loving friend and neighbor, the Soviet Union.'"<sup>67</sup>

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63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 213–215.

65 Ibid.

66 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 213–215.

67 Ibid.

**FIGURE 8:** The territorial extent of the second East Turkestan Republic (1944–1949), in blue. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



In August 1945, the GMD dispatched General Zhang Zhizhong to negotiate with the ETR—a decision encouraged by Soviet advisors. By August the following year, the ETR and GMD had formed a coalition government in Dihua (Ürümchi) with representatives from the ETR capital Ghulja.<sup>68</sup> The ceasefire was part of a much broader geopolitical shift taking shape. The Yalta Agreement of the previous February brought expanded Soviet influence across China. One of the preconditions for Moscow's declaration of war against Japan was for the United States to recognize Mongolia's independence. Another was the recognition of Soviet interests in Port Arthur (now Dalian, China). These conditions were granted without China's participation in the discussions.<sup>69</sup> The Soviet Union deepened relations with China, and on August 14, 1945, both countries signed the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. One note exchanged between Chinese

68 Andrew Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Xinjiang 1911–1949*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

69 See Serhii Plokhy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace*, (New York: Viking Press, 2010), <https://wcfia.harvard.edu/publications/yalta-price-peace>.

and Soviet officials around this period referred to events in the Uyghur region as the “internal affair of China” and stated Moscow’s position as one of non-interference.<sup>70</sup> This position would last just over three years.

When Mao triumphed over the nationalists, the Soviet Union pressed the Communists to seize the Uyghur region. On June 27, 1949, Stalin met with a CCP delegation led by Liu Shiaoqi to discuss the possibility of a \$300 million USD low-interest loan from the Soviet Union to China.<sup>71</sup> During the meeting, Stalin urged the CCP to quickly invade and occupy the Uyghur region before the British, who had strategic interests, could intervene. Knowing their days were numbered, the GMD’s local representatives Isa Yüsüp Alptekin and Muhämmäd Imin Bughra fled to Turkey, where they formed a Uyghur movement in exile. The Communist takeover was consolidated by August 1949, after the ETR leadership died in a mysterious plane crash.<sup>72</sup> Chinese Communist forces occupied the Uyghur region that same month, facing only minor military resistance from Kazakh nomads. The ETR was officially dissolved on December 20, 1949, and would be the last independent Uyghur state.

## “COMMUNAL APARTMENTS”: XINJIANG AS A NESTED HIERARCHY

The rise of the CCP brought with it complex debates about the nature of the new Chinese state and its relationship to the Turkic peoples of the Uyghur region. In 1951, just two years after the PLA marched into the Uyghur region; a meeting was convened in the one-time capital of the recently dissolved second East Turkestan Republic, Ghulja.<sup>73</sup> Uyghur leaders had gathered there to discuss the prospect of a fully autonomous “Republic of Uyghuristan,” with the legal authority to manage its affairs. Alarmed by these developments, the CCP dispatched a group of officials out to

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70 Serhii Plokhy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace*.

71 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 239–234.

72 *Ibid.*, 233–234.

73 Thomas Fingar, *The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016), <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780804797641/html>.

the Uyghur region to put a stop to open displays of “petty nationalism.”<sup>74</sup> The process of naming the region as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955 is illustrative of Beijing’s ambiguous relationship with the region. Mao had initially sought to drop the word “Uyghur,” concerned that it would give Uyghurs far too much rhetorical power within the province. This was not the most significant controversy, however. For Uyghur Communists, the inclusion of the term “Xinjiang” was a cause for protest since it had colonial connotations thanks to its literal translation “New Frontier.”<sup>75</sup> Mao disagreed, arguing that removing the word “Xinjiang” would concede that China was capable of imperialism, a theoretical possibility the CCP was unwilling to entertain.<sup>76</sup> Chinese Party theoreticians instead framed imperialism as a Western phenomenon, creating a narrative framework for denying minority rights.<sup>77</sup>

The Communists’ views on nationalities’ questions became similar to those of leaders of China’s earlier nationalist administrations. After his return to China to serve as the provisional first president of the newly formed First Republic of China (ROC) in the wake of the Xinhai Revolution (1911), Sun Yat-sen sought to reconcile Han identity with the vast, multiethnic boundaries of the recently collapsed Qing Empire, which his government had inherited.<sup>78</sup> In 1919, Sun urged Han Chinese to “sacrifice the separate nationality, history, and identity that [they] are so proud of and merge in all sincerity with Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans.”<sup>79</sup> But Sun did not consider the “Republic of Five Races,” immortalized by the five-colored flag of the ROC, as an alliance of equals. By 1924, Sun was characterizing the Han as the “single, pure race” of the Chinese nation.<sup>80</sup> He called for

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74 Fingar, *The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform*.

75 Dru Gladney, “Internal Colonialism and the Uyghur Nationality: Chinese Nationalism and its Subaltern Subjects.”

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 98–101.

79 Ibid.

80 Chiang Kai-shek, president of the Second Republic of China from 1928, took this thinking further, claiming that the five races were one ethnic group whose cultures had evolved along different trajectories simply as a result of geographical differences. Studies by conservative thinkers in the Guomindang appeared in the 1930s, making the same point. Xiong Shili, for instance, argued that the five “races” that Sun Yat-sen had identified

assimilationist policies, arguing that “the dying out of all names of individual people inhabiting China, such as Manchus, Tibetans, etc.” was a necessary step toward national unification.<sup>81</sup> The nationalist agenda, then, was primarily oriented toward eradicating difference for the sake of consolidating the new state’s vast territorial holdings.<sup>82</sup>

Despite their use of progressive language, the main goal of the Communists eventually grew to resemble that of the nationalists in pursuing territorial unity. In both of Mao’s major works on national minorities—*On the Ten Major Relationships* and *Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*—he acknowledges that most of the country’s territory belongs to numerically smaller nations.<sup>83</sup> To ensure territorial continuity with the Qing, Mao called for an attack on “Han chauvinism,” identifying it as a threat to the country’s integrity.<sup>84</sup> The Uyghur region’s capital city Dihua exemplified this national chauvinism.<sup>85</sup> Meaning “to enlighten,” a blatant display of Beijing’s “civilizing” mission in the region, the capital’s name was changed to Ürümchi in 1954, a Mongolian word meaning “beautiful pasture.” The early CCP government made some modest efforts toward addressing the balance of power between the dominant Han and China’s minority *minzu* through several affirmative action programs. Beijing established the Central Institute for Nationalities to train experts to deal with regional affairs and the Nationalities Affairs Commission (currently the

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(Manchu, Mongols, Hui, Tibetans, and Han) were part of the same line of evolution, in which the Han were dominant. Li Ji and Lin Yan, prominent conservative scholars, argued that all the inhabitants of China had a common ancestor. See Frank Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 331–338.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ning Fang, “China’s Democracy Path,” (London: Springer Publishing, 2015), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-662-47343-6>.

84 The idea of titular chauvinism was derived from Lenin’s writings on “great Russian chauvinism.” Unlike the Soviet Union, China’s experience of European imperialism had left the country wary of any project that could be interpreted as dividing the nation. Nevertheless, the Communist theory on “stages” of development led to national minorities being represented patronizingly as less evolved branches of civilization needing Han guidance to ascend to socialist modernity. See Bovington, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 100.

85 Chang-Tai Hung, *Politics of Control: Creating Red Culture in the Early People’s Republic of China*.

State Ethnic Affairs Commission), to map out strategies for improving relations between different cultural groups.<sup>86</sup> The CCP made early efforts to stamp out discrimination against Muslims. Immediately after coming to power, Communist authorities in Shanghai translated and published the Qur'an, with a preface discussing select readings to show how Islam and Communism were compatible ideologies.<sup>87</sup> The government's affirmative action policies included tuition subsidies for minority families, reduced taxes on mosques, and made *halal* kitchens in local hospitals. Mao also called for better recruitment of minorities in government, fearing unrest if local concerns were not adequately addressed. "Without a large number of Communist cadres drawn from minority nationalities, we cannot fundamentally solve the nationality problems and completely isolate ethnic reactionaries," he wrote in November 1949.<sup>88</sup>

This relative tolerance would begin to shift as the CCP grew to recognize the fragility of its hold over the country. In 1956, Mao launched his "Hundred Flowers" campaign to hear feedback from the masses on his government's leadership, unleashing an unprecedented torrent of criticism and public anger. In the Uyghur region, Turkic protesters argued that they had no autonomy under the existing system and demanded the power to organize their own affairs.<sup>89</sup> To shut down the wave of protests across the country, Mao launched a second campaign the following year, the "Anti-Rightist Movement," to harass, detain, and execute leading figures of dissent. Newspaper reports from 1958 suggest that the head of the Xinjiang Cultural Bureau was identified as part of a rightwing plot to unseat the CCP.<sup>90</sup> Hundreds of other cultural figures in the Uyghur region were likewise rounded up and accused of "ethnic hostilities" for expressing criticism of the rising number of Han laborers immigrating into the province. Over 100,000 people were investigated in the Uyghur region by the campaign's end, with 830 arrested and 50 executed.<sup>91</sup>

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86 Hung, "The Cultural Palace of Nationalities: Ethnicities Under One Roof?"

87 Ibid.

88 Hung, *The Cultural Palace of Nationalities: Ethnicities Under One Roof?*

89 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 131–133.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

The specter of foreign interference would also plague the new government's nation-building policies. Premier Zhou Enlai was dispatched to Qingdao in 1957 to give a speech (made public only in 1980) on the Party's official line regarding nationalities policies. The address marked an abrupt about-turn from the previous policy. In its early years, the CCP had borrowed its approach to national minorities from Russian revolutionaries Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, including Lenin's controversial "right to secession."<sup>92</sup> The experiences of the Civil War (1927–1937 and 1945–1949) hardened the CCP, however, and the Party had lost its appetite for such policies. During his 1957 speech, Zhou argued several times that a federated model would be inappropriate for China. He argued that "the imperialists are attempting to split Tibet, Taiwan, and even Xinjiang from our country. Under such circumstances, we will call our state the People's Republic of China, and not a federation."<sup>93</sup> This fixation on foreign interference in minority regions would also lead to the Party's view that only Han could be relied on for ensuring the state's territorial integrity. At the time, it was not uncommon for state propaganda to make the argument that autonomy for minority regions would "serve to benefit the forces of imperialism."<sup>94</sup>

To counteract real, or perceived, great power machinations in the Uyghur region, the Party-state established the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps.<sup>95</sup> Ostensibly an economic institution designed to coordinate the region's agricultural policies, the XPCC had broader paramilitary functions, exemplified by its motto: "On one shoulder a rifle, on the other a hoe."<sup>96</sup> Its primary role was to absorb, feed, and house many Han settlers by creating arable land to cultivate. Within a decade of its

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92 In the 1931 Constitution of the Chinese Soviet Republic in Jiangxi, for example, the law stated that: "The Soviet government in China recognizes the right of self-determination of the national minorities in China; the Mongols, Muslims, Tibetans, Miao, Li, Koreans, and others inhabiting the territory of China enjoy the complete right to self-determination, that is, they may either join, or secede from, the Federation of Chinese Soviets, or form their state as they may prefer." See Jiann Hsieh, "China's Nationalities Policy: Its Development and Problems," *Anthropos* 81, (1986): 1–20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40462022>.

93 Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, 313.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., 306.

96 Ibid.

founding, the XPCC had tripled the volume of arable land in the province and transformed small towns with Uyghur majorities into large-scale cities in which Uyghurs were an impoverished minority.<sup>97</sup> In Korla, for example, which had less than 30,000 people in 1949, and Han accounted for just two percent of the population, had tripled in size by 1955, and by 1965 Han accounted for more than half the population.<sup>98</sup> This network of strategically located XPCC units would also enhance central control by giving the growing Han population a stake in the distribution of power.

Beijing also counteracted Uyghur claims to the region by promoting the idea of the XUAR as a multiethnic province in 1955 and parceling out “sub-autonomous” status that significantly altered the political balance in the region. Such policies served the CCP’s twin goals of voicing progressive support for the Uyghur region’s 13 officially recognized nationalities (*minzu*)<sup>99</sup> while mitigating against potential risks associated with Uyghurs’ demographic weight.<sup>100</sup> It was a strategy of divide and rule.<sup>101</sup> Thus, while

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97 Ibid.

98 Tom Cliff, “Peripheral Urbanism: Making History on China’s Northwest Frontier,” *China Perspectives* 3, (2013): 13–12, <https://journals.openedition.org/chin perspectives/6249>.

99 China’s government officially recognises 56 *minzu* (民族) groups in China: a single Han majority and 55 smaller groups that account for 7% of China’s population. The term *minzu* can refer to ‘nation’, ‘race’, ‘people’ and ‘ethnicity’ depending on its concept, making it difficult to translate. Party officials initially used the term ‘nationality’ when translating the term into English. The Party began shifting its translation to “ethnic minorities” after the collapse of the Soviet Union. CCP discourse from 1992–present tends to view nationalism as the driving force which brought an end to the Soviet project, seeing its demise as a cautionary tale. See James Leibold, “The *minzu* net: China’s fragmented national form,” *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 3 (2016): 425–428.

100 The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (1954) declared that it would be a unified country with multiple *minzu* (56 officially recognized by 1980) classified along with the four Stalinist criteria of a common territory, language, culture, and economy.

101 According to official statistics from 2017, the Uyghur influence remains significantly watered down in at least two of the five autonomous prefectures. The Bayangol Mongol Autonomous Region is the starkest example. Accounting for over 30 percent of the Uyghur region’s total territory, some 50,000 Mongols (according to 2015 figures) nominally exercise autonomy in a region with 440,000 Uyghurs and 826,000 Han. If the Uyghurs were to call for autonomy or even outright independence, they would be opposed by nearly eight million Han, large contingents linked to XPCC units, and the more than two million members of other Turkic, Xibo, and Mongol groups who have been given disproportionate authority within the regional structure. See “Population of Ethnic Group by Region, State, City, County,” Statistic Bureau of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region accessed via The Wayback Machine, March 15, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/>

Uyghurs have been listed in the XUAR's official name since 1955 as the custodians of the region, they found themselves nestled within a complex patchwork of sub-autonomies designed to dilute their influence.<sup>102</sup> Soviet historian Yuri Slezkine had described the USSR as a communal apartment in which nations are confined to their rooms, but Russians can enter at will, in addition to having control over the building and its hallways.<sup>103</sup> The Uyghurs in the PRC found that even their living space had been divided up into something altogether more claustrophobic, like a New York convertible studio apartment.

**FIGURE 9:** The territorial divisions of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region emphasizing ethnic minority regions. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



[web/20171011101904/http://www.xjtj.gov.cn/sjcx/tjnj\\_3415/2016xjtjnj/rkjy/201707/t20170714\\_539450.html](http://www.xjtj.gov.cn/sjcx/tjnj_3415/2016xjtjnj/rkjy/201707/t20170714_539450.html) and "Population of Ethnic Group by Region, State, City, County," Statistic Bureau of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

102 Susan Walcott and Corey Johnson, *Eurasian Corridors of Interconnection: From South China to the Caspian Sea*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

103 Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2, (1994): 414–452, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2501300>.

The Party-state designed this system to prevent the prospect of fragmentation along national lines. Article 15 of the Chinese constitution states plainly that local autonomous governments are subordinate to the central government. Article 20, meanwhile, grants the autonomous government the right to “alter or suspend” central policies but only with the center’s permission to do so.<sup>104</sup> Thus, the autonomous rights granted by the constitution are in practice watered down by an institutional structure that remains subordinate to Beijing.<sup>105</sup>

Since its political inception, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has been designed as a nested hierarchy in which Beijing effectively governs from the top, and Uyghur agency is watered down from below in a complex system of checks without balance. This system has long been a source of local resentment and political instability.

## MIXING SAND: XINJIANG AS A SETTLER-COLONIAL OUTPOST

The PRC’s turn toward hardline assimilationist policies was further compounded by worsening relations with the Soviet Union. Rifts in the Sino-Soviet alliance became apparent in July 1958 during Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to China. Sitting in Zhongnanhai, Khrushchev decided to address brewing territorial disputes between the two powers head-on. “Do you consider us ‘red imperialists?’” he asked Mao, incredulously.<sup>106</sup>

Mao accused Khrushchev of infringing on Chinese sovereignty and seeking to “take away all [China’s] coastal areas.” As relations entered a state of free-fall, the situation on the XUAR-Soviet border grew tense as Mao claimed territory across Central Asia. In the Pamir Mountains, regions lying within today’s Republic of Tajikistan, China accused Moscow of occupying more than 12,000 square miles of Chinese territory in violation of earlier protocols signed by the Russian Empire. So vast were

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104 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 109–197.

105 Ibid.

106 “First Conversation Between N.S. Khrushchev and Mao Zedong, Hall of Huaizhentan [Beijing] July 31, 1958,” International History Archive, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112080.pdf?v=0155c40dda866dfae98d3fed81bbff0e>.

China's territorial claims that Khrushchev would later write in his memoirs that "no sane person would sign something like this...All socialist countries have their borders from former tsars, emperors, and kings. If we build our relations on this basis, how far would this take us?"<sup>107</sup>

In a bid to seal the region off from external influence, Beijing began purging Turkic officials who had been aligned with either the second ETR or the Soviet Union, accusing them of "local nationalism" and "revisionism."<sup>108</sup> These policies would mutate into a full-fledged assimilation campaign amidst the radical collectivization and industrialization drive known as the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). During this period, even ethnicity became an "obstacle to progress," with attacks on Islam and other "backward customs" ramped up to boost productivity.<sup>109</sup> The social dislocation brought about by this campaign resulted in an influx of Han migrants fleeing their famine-stricken provinces for the XUAR. Almost 800,000 Han entered the Uyghur region between 1959 and 1960, the highest ever recorded, with the bulk being absorbed into XPCC-controlled farms. Since then, the demographic shifts have been substantial. While Uyghurs constituted 94 percent of the XUAR's population in 1945, this dropped to just 60 percent by 1982. Han meanwhile, grew to be over 30 percent of the population over this same timeline.<sup>110</sup> It is a long-held belief among Beijing officials since the late Qing-era that Han settlers are more loyal to the state than Uyghurs. As recently as August 2021, leaked internal Party circulations from CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping continue to state this view clearly: "population proportion and population security are important foundations for long-term peace and stability."<sup>111</sup> Local officials colloquially refer to the settlement of Han immigrants in the XUAR as "mixing sand."<sup>112</sup>

At the height of the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward in April 1962, nearly 60,000 people (Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and others) fled into the

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107 Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heaven: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–67*.

108 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 131–136.

109 Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011).

110 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 131–136.

111 Zenz, testimony on *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*.

112 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 131–136.

Soviet Union.<sup>113</sup> To avert further losses, XPCC units were dispatched to the border areas, to block people's exit. Aggressive border control sparked violent demonstrations in Yining (Ghulja), in the northern parts of the XUAR, with a crowd of thousands allegedly calling for the overthrow of the CCP and the "elimination of the Chinese problem."<sup>114</sup> Troops from the XPCC's Agricultural Fourth Division were sent to repress the riots by firing live rounds into the crowd. This refugee crisis, combined with rapidly unraveling Sino-Soviet relations, led to a genuine, albeit overblown, fear in Beijing that hostile former citizens would receive military training in the USSR and seek vengeance. Over the next four years, the XPCC took over a band of territory along the Sino-Soviet border in Ili, Bortale, Tarbaghatay, and Altay, which reached 18 miles wide in some places, in effect setting up a strict dividing line between the Kazakhs of the Uyghur region and those in the wealthier Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic across the border.<sup>115</sup>

In 1966, more waves of Turkic refugees fled across the Soviet border as Mao unleashed the carnage of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Minority persecution skyrocketed in the XUAR, with Red Guards requisitioning religious buildings and offending local Muslims by converting mosques into slaughterhouses for pigs. Local religious scholars were tortured by having Qur'ans repeatedly dropped on their heads during public "struggle sessions."<sup>116</sup> Uyghurs with foreign connections were particularly suspect throughout this period. "It was dangerous even to admit that you have relatives across the border," recalled one Uyghur who had a grandmother in Kazakhstan. "You might be persecuted as a spy."<sup>117</sup> A Uyghur cadre at the Ministry of Railways in Ürümchi was arrested just for having a sister in Uzbekistan.<sup>118</sup>

Moscow was quick to take advantage of the situation. Its Uyghur-language broadcasts beamed in from Radio Tashkent condemned China's

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113 "The Yi-Ta Incident, 1962," Wilson Center Digital Archives, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars 2021, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/191/the-yi-ta-incident-1962>.

114 "The Yi-Ta Incident, 1962."

115 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 263–271.

116 Frank Dikotter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2017).

117 Dikotter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976*.

118 Ibid.

religious persecution. A Uyghur-language theater opened in Almaty, and Uyghur music and television channels were established in Soviet Central Asia.<sup>119</sup> To counter Soviet influence, the CCP launched a campaign to reduce any Soviet and Uyghur influence over the Uyghur region's politics. The persecution hit the institutional apparatus of the region, with minority cadres in the area plummeting by 25 percent between 1965 and 1975.<sup>120</sup> This imbalance would take a significant period of time to readjust to more equitable levels. Even in 1979, non-Hans held only 29 percent of cadre positions.

Moreover, Moscow encouraged and probably organized Kazakhstan-based ethnic guerillas to raid the Uyghur region's frontier posts, with multiple incidents recorded in 1967.<sup>121</sup> On August 20, 1969, members of a secretive Uyghur resistance movement known as the East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party (ETPRP) attempted to set up a military camp on the Sino-Soviet border but were killed the following day by PLA forces after an informant alerted the Chinese side.<sup>122</sup> Accounts of the history of these movements vary widely, according to historian James Millward. An internal CCP cable from the 1990s stated that the ETPRP was the most significant "counter-revolutionary separatist conspiracy" since 1949.<sup>123</sup> The same magazine claimed that the ETPRP's local offices had distributed fifty publications, including three newspapers entitled *The Torch*, *Independence*, and *Tianshan Guerilla*.<sup>124</sup> The group allegedly planned to create the third East Turkestan Republic that would be pro-Soviet in orientation. But according to ETPRP veterans in Kazakhstan, the Soviets never provided aid.<sup>125</sup> Recent sources say the group was eliminated in 1970 when security services arrested 6,000 people accused of being involved with it.<sup>126</sup>

In his meeting with U.S. President Richard Nixon on February 25, 1972, Premier Zhou Enlai warned of the Soviet Union's aggressive intentions

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119 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 263–271.

120 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*.

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 49.

against China. “Maybe they will try to create the Turkestan Republic,” he said. “But it will not be easy for them to enter Xinjiang, and even if they come in, it will be hard for them to get out. No matter what, we will make no provocations.”<sup>127</sup> These tensions filtered down to local politics, with the XUAR’s press issuing regular calls for “unity” and warning against efforts to “sow disorder” and undermine “the great alliance.”<sup>128</sup> A 1975 editorial in the *Xinjiang People’s Daily* commemorating the 20th anniversary of the founding of the XUAR called for action against the “handful of national splittist elements and counter-revolutionaries under the cloak of religion who throw themselves into the arms of the Soviet revisionists.”<sup>129</sup> The degree of reporting suggests that the instability of the Cultural Revolution created space for the emergence of organized Uyghur resistance against CCP rule. Nevertheless, open insurrection likely involved only a tiny minority during this era of unrest.<sup>130</sup> Like most people in the country at the time, the rest tried to avoid the political infighting and make it through the storm without loss of life or income.

China’s Party elite faced a crisis with the fall of the radical leftist Gang of Four after Mao’s death in 1976. As the primary architects of the Cultural Revolution, this radical clique had provoked a widespread backlash, particularly among Uyghur and other minority communities that faced daily attacks on their identities.<sup>131</sup> Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, one of the Gang of Four, said that Turkic minorities, with their “outlandish” songs, were “no better than foreign devils and aliens. What is so special about your tiny Xinjiang? I despise you.”<sup>132</sup> The government had to regain the trust of its minority nationalities, but officials also worried that more tolerant policies would open the door to further Soviet-backed unrest.

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127 Ibid.

128 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 273.

129 Hung, *Politics of Control: Creating Red Culture in the Early People’s Republic of China*.

130 Ibid.

131 Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 135.

132 Michael Clarke, *Xinjiang and China’s Rise in Central Asia: A History*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 66. <https://www.routledge.com/Xinjiang-and-Chinas-Rise-in-Central-Asia---A-History/Clarke/p/book/9780415728386>.

## CROSSING THE RIVER: XINJIANG AS A STRATEGIC ASSET

Relations between Han and minority cadres continued to deteriorate in the early 1980s. In August 1981, Uyghur members of the Provincial Committee revolted against the majority Han members.<sup>133</sup> In response, Deng Xiaoping, then vice-chairman, visited the Uyghur region. It was reported that Deng faced an “unsteady” situation during his inspection tour, with Uyghur dissidents calling for self-rule.<sup>134</sup> To appease locals, Deng called for a reorganization of local leadership and recalled the popular Wang Enmao from retirement to return to the XUAR as Party Secretary and calm tensions. The following year, Deng Xiaoping re-established the XPCC. The decision was made to expand the presence of paramilitary forces in the region to crush protests and promote increased Han in-migration to the Uyghur region.<sup>135</sup> After its reinstatement, the XPCC was charged with strengthening national unity, managing socialist enterprises, defending the Uyghur frontier, and reinforcing Party leadership. The XPCC’s economic functions were also expanded, and by 1983, the corps had reportedly reclaimed 937,000 hectares of land and had overseen the construction of 691 factories.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, the XPCC accounted for a quarter of the region’s total economic output within a year.<sup>137</sup>

In tandem, liberal reformer Hu Yaobang, one of the youngest leaders in the Central Committee, who was soon promoted to CCP secretary-general, attempted to remove the more assimilationist aspects of cultural policy in the late-Mao era. Hu had traveled to Tibet to investigate local conditions there and was left appalled by the poverty he saw.<sup>138</sup> He brought insights from this experience to advance the idea of “genuine autonomy” in the Uyghur region. Deng later recalled asking Hu at the time: “How can you propose such a resolution in a *minzu* autonomous region? How can it

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133 Ibid.

134 Ibid.

135 Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia: A History*, 177.

136 Ibid., 82.

137 Ibid.

138 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 53.

be ok to let the autonomous region exercise power itself?"<sup>139</sup> The ongoing geopolitical struggle with the Soviet Union helped bolster Hu's liberal policies as China's authorities feared the possibility of strategic encirclement.<sup>140</sup> Strategists in Beijing perceived the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as part of a Soviet drive to bring Southeast Asia under Moscow's influence and penetrate China. To fight back against this perceived threat, Beijing began a covert operation to arm the Afghan mujahideen.<sup>141</sup> China's relations with the U.S. also deepened throughout this era after Washington established two strategically important electronic intelligence posts in the Uyghur region to monitor Soviet activities.<sup>142</sup> The U.S. also obtained an agreement for over-flights above Chinese territory for planes carrying assistance for the mujahideen. The Soviet invasion furthered China's domestic and international agendas by presenting itself as a friend and ally of the Islamic world. On January 5, 1980, the Chinese Islamic Association, with the full backing of China's government, stated that it would not tolerate the Soviet hegemon's invasion because of its close ties with the Afghan people.<sup>143</sup> China also lobbied to gain the Islamic world's support in its struggle against the Soviet Union during the January 1980 Islamic Ministers' Conference in Islamabad.<sup>144</sup>

This policy had implications for minority religious rights in the Uyghur region. The XUAR's Islamic Association was allowed to meet for the first time in 17 years; an Arabic alphabet was reinstated for Uyghur; and thousands of mosques were built or reopened, some with funds from the World Muslim League.<sup>145</sup> There were over 5,000 mosques in the Qäshqär District before the Cultural Revolution. This figure had plummeted to just 392 by

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139 Ibid.

140 Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia: A History*, 75.

141 Hilali Az, "China's Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 3, (2001): 323–351, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634930120095349?journalCode=ccas20>.

142 Yitzhak Shichor, "The Great Wall of Steel: Military and Strategy in Xinjiang," in *Xinjiang*, ed. S. Frederick Starr, (London: Routledge Press, 2015), 15.

143 Jardine and Greer, *The Chinese Islamic Association in the Arab World: The Use of Islamic Soft Power in Promoting Silence on Xinjiang*.

144 Hilali Az, "China's Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan."

145 Jardine and Greer, *The Chinese Islamic Association in the Arab World: The Use of Islamic Soft Power in Promoting Silence on Xinjiang*.

its conclusion.<sup>146</sup> From the moment of Deng's relaxation of cultural policies in 1980, Uyghur communities had rebuilt over two-thirds of the original number within the first two years. By the end of the decade, mosques had expanded dramatically across the region.<sup>147</sup> Alongside the increase in mosques, pilgrims were allowed to go on *hajj*, and there was a surge in religious publications, many of them printed in Pakistan.<sup>148</sup> Meanwhile, Muslims were permitted to study in *madrassas* abroad. Nevertheless, the Party remained wary of religious influence infiltrating CCP ranks. According to surveys conducted in 1983, some 20 to 30 percent of rural Party members in the XUAR were believed to be practicing religion.<sup>149</sup> In a study in Qaraqosh (Moyu), almost 83 percent of officials said they were practicing Islam.<sup>150</sup> These statistics brought the fear of a loss of ideological control in the Uyghur region.

By the mid-1980s, the growing number of student protests in the XUAR and across China as a whole had brought an end to Hu Yaobang's liberal experiments. In 1987 he was purged from the Party. Just as the 1989 Tiananmen Protests were heating up, Muslim students marched in Ürümqi to protest the publication of *Sexual Customs (Xing Fengsu)*, a book containing insulting misrepresentations of Islam.<sup>151</sup> The demonstration quickly descended into rioting, leaving 200 people injured. Amid the turmoil, a smaller march took place in Beijing on May 12. Around 3,000 members from the Central Academy of Nationalities, most of them Hui or Uyghur, marched through the streets chanting "Punish China's Rushdie!"<sup>152</sup> The most objectionable part of the book claimed that Muslims went on *hajj* to indulge in homosexuality and bestiality.<sup>153</sup>

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146 Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 166.

147 Ibid., 166–173.

148 Ibid.

149 Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*.

150 Ibid., 173.

151 James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 281.

152 This is a reference to controversial British-American novelist Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie, author of the 1988 book *The Satanic Verses*, which sparked protests across the Muslim world. Death threats were made against him, including a 1989 *fatwa* calling for his assassination issued by Iran's Supreme Leader at the time, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

153 James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 281.

This unrest in the Uyghur region was exacerbated by the government's reimagining of the province, from a liability to a strategic asset in the modernization of the PRC. Following Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping embarked on China's historic "reform and opening" to introduce marketization policies and reinvigorate the country's stagnant economy.<sup>154</sup> The Uyghur region and its abundant supply of natural resources were viewed as being advantageous for the country. This thinking was crucial to the 7th Five-Year Plan (1986–1991), which reduced the Uyghur region to a supplier of raw materials for China's coastal development strategy.<sup>155</sup> This created a growing economic disparity between China's eastern and western provinces, which would lead to unrest.

Economic strains exacerbated inter-ethnic conflict toward the end of the decade when China's Han-driven modernization campaign led to the economic marginalization of minorities. Small farms run by Uyghurs were at a disadvantage compared with those of the XPCPC, whose larger, mechanized farms had better access to water, received state subsidies, and benefited from economies of scale.<sup>156</sup> The introduction of school fees further drained farmers' resources after the mid-1980s. Though the tuition was small, it was a burden that contributed to a rise in the number of Uyghur students dropping out after middle school. By the beginning of the 1990s, Han Chinese were twice as likely to continue studying after 16 as their Uyghur peers.<sup>157</sup> This lack of primary education among Uyghurs from the countryside contributed to the difficulties many would later face in the altered labor market of the 1990s.

The culmination of rising Han in-migration, uneven economic development, and a lack of opportunities for Uyghurs, was an explosion of violence in the province in 1990, leading to the securitization of Beijing's approach to the region and a growing fixation on the Uyghur diaspora in Central and South Asia as a potential source of instability.

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154 Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia: A History*, 82–88.

155 Ibid.

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.



## PART TWO

# How Xinjiang Influences China's Foreign Policy

**CHINA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH** the Uyghur region has been marked by settler-colonial development models, a hyper-centralized bureaucracy hostile to local needs, and cultural exclusion. These dynamics have grown more severe in recent decades. The onset of the Global War on Terror in 2001 permitted China's Party-state to deploy significant repressive force, in political, legal, and police/military terms, which has allowed it to stamp out future challenges to state power. Today, China has combined its settler-colonial policies with the dehumanizing language of the GWOT to embark on a mass internment campaign of ethnic minorities on a scale unheard of since the Second World War.

This intensifying campaign of repression has been pushing the Uyghurs beyond China's borders into Central, South, and Southeast Asia, as well as the MENA. From the CCP's perspective, these growing diaspora communities are becoming a cause for concern. Rather than view the rapid flux of Uyghurs moving overseas as economic or political refugees, China views them only through the lens of the "Three Evils." Internationally, Beijing has reframed its discourse on the Uyghur region to reflect the language of the GWOT in order to gain recognition for its repressive policies. China has moved towards the achievement of neutralizing the international Uyghur community through three main avenues: repackaging local, ethnic-based violence to fit an expansive definition of "terrorism"; security and counterterrorism cooperation globally within the GWOT framework; and enhanced economic relationships around the world to counter criticism of its policies in the XUAR.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Countries that choose to oppose China have often suffered for doing so. In June 2021,

As we will see in the chapters that follow, the use of the term “terror” is a recent phenomenon in China’s long struggle to pacify the Uyghur region. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CCP saw the bipolar, state-centric world of the Cold War replaced by a more complex reality with the potential for ethnoreligious conflict. From the 1990s through the beginning of the GWOT in 2001, China’s Party-state consistently framed violent incidents in the Uyghur region as manifestations of “separatism” and “counter-revolutionary activity,” either inspired by “hostile external forces” or “reactionary” Turkic nationalists residing in post-Soviet Central Asia and Turkey. This fixation on separatism and eventually terrorism influenced China’s relations with the Central Asian republics and became part of the agenda within the Shanghai Five and its successor, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

This multilateral framework, comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, while initially concerned with resolving Soviet-era border disputes, evolved to focus on combating what the organization calls the “Three Evils” of “separatism, extremism, and terrorism.” In reality, the SCO has become a key mechanism through which China bypasses international laws to pursue regime critics overseas. From 2001 to the present, China has argued that it is facing an Uyghur insurgency with links to global terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda. But such claims should always be assessed critically. Terror lists issued by Beijing in the past have included human rights advocacy groups such as World Uyghur Congress. Analysts also frequently fail to note that this Islamist terror narrative operates in tandem with the ethno-nationalist frameworks of decades past. In a series of secret speeches given in the XUAR in 2014, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed to the example of the former Soviet bloc to argue that economic growth would not immunize society against ethnic separatism. The Baltic republics were among the most developed in the Soviet Union, but also the first to leave when the country broke up, he told the leadership conference. “We say that development is the top priority

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Ukraine joined a statement by over 40 countries at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, urging China to allow independent observers to enter the Uyghur region. China responded by threatening to block a shipment of Covid-19 vaccines to Ukraine, forcing the government in Kyiv to back down. See Jamey Keaten, “Diplomats Say China Puts Squeeze on Ukraine,” *Associated Press*, June 25, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-china-europe-ukraine-health-a0a5ae8f735b92e39c623e453529cbb9>

and the basis for achieving lasting security, and that's right," Xi Jinping stated. "But it would be wrong to believe that with development every problem solves itself."

Repression in the Uyghur region—including a militarized police presence, use of facial recognition cameras, regular scanning of electronic devices for "suspect" content, and the detention of millions of Uyghurs in re-education camps—have further alienated Uyghurs in the XUAR. Many Uyghurs have responded by migrating abroad, including via illegal channels; this has put migrants in danger while also creating security challenges for China as human traffickers and extremist networks seek to exploit vulnerable refugees.

China has used its substantial economic leverage to restrict such channels and co-opts governments worldwide to aid it in its campaign to intimidate, detain or forcibly return individuals in the international Uyghur community. In particular, the BRI's emphasis on trans-Eurasian connectivity has given China an unprecedented degree of influence in places where it was previously limited, such as the MENA (see Appendix Three). This has had devastating consequences for the Uyghur diaspora there, as we will see in chapter five. This study shows that, contrary to China's long-stated principle of non-interference, Beijing has shown willingness to interfere in the affairs of other states in pursuit of what it perceives to be key national security objectives.

While some have argued cooperation with China on counterterrorism is an avenue through which to socialize Beijing into accepting the norms of the liberal international order,<sup>2</sup> these views often fail to appreciate the extent to which China has instrumentalized the Uyghur issue to challenge these same norms. Furthermore, China is increasingly advancing its "Xinjiang model" as a template for governance around the world. In January 2022, protests rocked the Kazakh steppe. From the small oil town of Zhanaozen to the cultural capital Almaty, people took to the streets demanding change. On the night of January 5, these protests turned violent, with unknown parties seizing the buildings of the security services and arming themselves.

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2 Mollie Saltkog and Colin Clarke, "China's Rights Abuses in Xinjiang Could Provoke a Global Terrorist Backlash," *Foreign Affairs*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-01-16/chinas-rights-abuses-xinjiang-could-provoke-global-terrorist-backlash>.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev quickly labeled them “terrorists,”<sup>3</sup> which paved the way for his invitation to Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization peacekeepers. Party mouthpiece *Global Times* was quick to remark: “Just like China’s Xinjiang region years ago, Kazakhstan is a victim of a gradual infiltration of global extremism and terrorism. Chinese government’s [sic] efforts to curb extremism might provide countries like Kazakhstan with some valuable experience.” According to Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister, China even proposed sending soldiers to aid the crackdown. “[China] was ready to provide necessary assistance... But we do not have a legal basis to accept foreign forces from countries outside the CSTO.”<sup>4</sup>

Uncritical international cooperation with Beijing on counterterrorism runs the risk of facilitating not only the expansion of the “security state” in the XUAR but also adding pressure to individuals and organizations in third countries, including foreign nationals. China scholar Anne-Marie Brady, for example, faced a year of ongoing harassment and intimidation that saw her office broken into and home burglarized for access to her research on Chinese government operations abroad. In 2018, 169 China scholars signed a letter urging the New Zealand government to protect her from further harassment, intimidation, and theft. This letter outlined explicit concerns to Dr. Brady and further noted the increasing threats and harassment the community of Western-based China scholars has faced in recent years.<sup>5</sup> China’s allies have also targeted foreign researchers. In August 2017, Cambodian state media accused American investigative journalist Geoffrey Cain of seeking to “foment unrest” in the Uyghur region on behalf of an unnamed “superpower country.”<sup>6</sup>

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3 This has since changed, with the President of Kazakhstan now accusing his predecessor of fomenting a coup against him.

4 “[China Was Ready to Provide Military Assistance - Kazakh Foreign Minister] Китай был готов предоставить военную помощь – глава МИД Казахстана,” *TengriNews*, January 19, 2022, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/kitay-gotov-predostavit-voennuyu-pomosch-glava-mid-459624/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kitay-gotov-predostavit-voennuyu-pomosch-glava-mid-459624/)

5 Charlotte Graham-McLay, “China Watchers Demand Action on Harassment of New Zealand Professor,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/07/world/asia/new-zealand-academic-harassment-china.html>.

6 “[Facebook Leaks ‘Another Foreign Spy Hiding in Opposition Party to overthrow Government’] Facebook ទម្ងន់លាយឡំតិបិយ «ចារកម្មបរទេសមុនាក៏ឡតបង្កកប់ខុល្លនក្នុងគណបក្សសប្បុរសឆាំង ដ៏ម្លប់ផ្អែត្តលរំលំរដ្ឋប្រតិបាល»,” *Fresh News*, August 24, 2017, <http://freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/63667-facebook-2.html>.

The following chapters explore the evolution of China's transnational repression of the Uyghurs—a campaign that is now global in scope. The chapters show how Beijing had used the language of the GWOT to target Uyghur dissidents and critics of its human rights abuses in the XUAR. In addition, part two documents the growth of new techniques for repression due to modern technology, including China's smart city programs and hacking campaigns.

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Road to Chitral

**“Lies written in ink cannot disguise facts written in blood.”**

Lu Xun, *A Rose Without Blooms*

**ON AUGUST 13, 1891**, British Captain Francis Younghusband was stationed high in Badakhshan when Russian officers advanced on his camp. Known throughout Victorian England as the “roof of the world,” the Pamir Mountains divided the Russian and British empires outside imperial China. Younghusband, an adventurous intelligence officer from the British Raj, greeted his Russian counterpart Colonel Yanov cordially enough but relations were tense.<sup>1</sup>

The Russians were on a reconnaissance mission while the bulk of their forces remained stationed at Bozai-Gombaz, an ancient settlement in Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor. This narrow pathway had been a vital artery on the old Silk Road for millennia, connecting China with the world outside. Through this unforgiving series of trails, the famous Tang Dynasty-era monk Xuanzang made his arduous trek to India searching for Buddhist scriptures. According to intelligence gathered by Younghusband, Yanov was tasked with finding new strategic routes through this corridor to push south into India. The Russians needed to penetrate this harsh landscape because the Wakhan Corridor played a vital role in Britain’s strategy to contain Russia.<sup>2</sup> In the decades prior, the Russian Empire had been busy annexing the ancient Silk Road cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, as well as the entire Khanate of Khoqand. For power brokers in London, this expansion brought Russian soldiers dangerously close to British holdings

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1 Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*, (London: John Murray Press, 2006), 465–468.

2 Ibid.

in India. Afghanistan, a nominally independent kingdom long-beholden to British interests, was chosen as a buffer to keep the Tsar at bay, but there was a catch.<sup>3</sup> In the patchwork of tribal affiliations that make up the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the frontiers of the then-kingdom were ill-defined and contested, none more so than those traversing the Pamirs.

**FIGURE 10:** The Russian Empire’s expansion into Central Asia throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



The two officers met several days after their vodka-fuelled introductions, under less cordial circumstances. “You may think this is Afghan territory,” Colonel Yanov informed the Englishman on his return, “but we consider it

3 Ibid.

Russian.” The Russian suggested providing his counterpart with an armed escort to see him out of the terrain. Younghusband asked what would happen if he refused to leave. “We will have to remove you by force” was the matter-of-fact response, making both men uncomfortable.<sup>4</sup> Younghusband agreed to leave Yanov’s camp peacefully. The development appeared to confirm Britain’s worst fears of an attack on the “Pamir Gap.”<sup>5</sup> If it achieved a common boundary with British India, Russia would have a vital pressure point to squeeze the British Empire for concessions in other parts of the world. Adding fuel to this geopolitical fire, Younghusband had learned that Yanov’s men had been conducting raids around Chitral, a principality on today’s Afghan-Pakistan border connecting the Wakhan Corridor with the British Empire. The Russians were surprised that London had no formal representative in Chitral, a serious deficit in light of the bloody leadership crisis erupting in the wake of the ruling Mir’s death. Fears that this restive principality would emerge as an invasion route began in 1874 after British military officers claimed Russia could strike India within 13 days if they took Chitral.

However, rather than push forward amid the crisis there, St. Petersburg unexpectedly sued for peace. Russia was in the grip of famine, and political instability and war with Britain would only exacerbate these crises. In the end, Russia withdrew its troops and its claims on the Pamirs pending a permanent settlement of the nebulous frontier. The Tsar decreed that Yanov’s expulsion of Younghusband from the Wakhan Corridor had “violated the elementary principles of international law.”<sup>6</sup> In 1895, a Pamir Boundary Commission was established to settle the Afghan question once and for all. Neither Afghanistan nor the Qing Empire took part in the surveys and negotiations. The legacy of those negotiations was the transformation of the Wakhan Corridor into a fixed boundary within Afghanistan, which acted as a buffer between the two empires. It also established a permanent border between Afghanistan and China. This frontier continues to have a profound impact on the modern-day XUAR.

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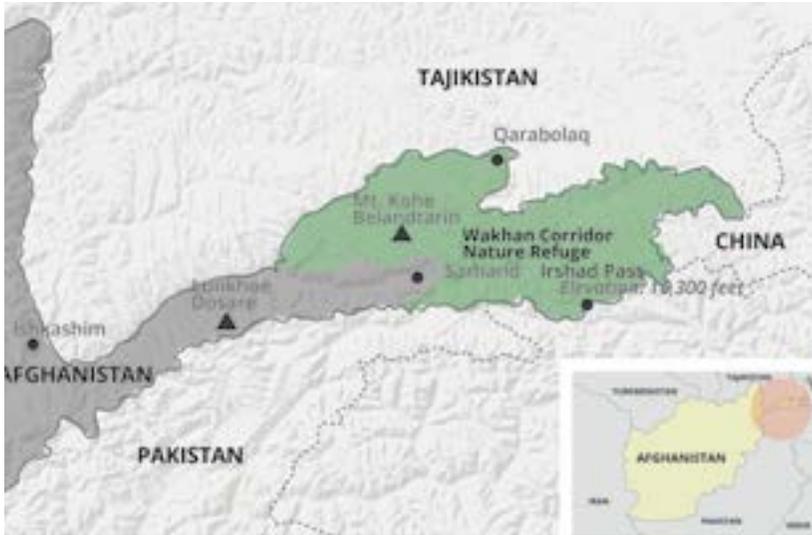
4 Ibid.

5 In the chambers of the British parliament, two new breeds of political leaders had emerged: those who backed “forward policies” pushing the country’s military might into Afghanistan to choke off any Russian advance, and those who sought a diplomatic solution to the contest—labeled “the school of masterly inactivity” by London’s security hawks.

6 Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*, 465–468.

For the Russians, the agreement secured the Pamir Plateau, which currently constitutes Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast.

**FIGURE 11:** A map of the Wakhan Corridor today. This narrow strip of land borders China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



Today, in the town of Shaymak in Tajikistan, in the Central Asian highlands, China seeks to project power into the region to stifle Uyghurs. The roof of the world now hosts Sitod (“Headquarters” in the Tajik language), a Chinese strategic facility that silently guards the ancient Silk Road passage.<sup>7</sup> To the Wakhan Corridor’s south lies greater Kashmir, a hotly contested geopolitical flashpoint between India, Pakistan, and China. To the east, across the snowy Wakhjir Pass, lies the Uyghur region. As the security situation in Afghanistan remains uncertain, Beijing views this chokepoint as a possible conduit through which Uyghur militants in Afghanistan

7 “Tajikistan: Secret Chinese Base Becomes Slightly Less Secret,” *Eurasianet*, September 23, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-secret-chinese-base-becomes-slightly-less-secret>.

could spark conflict in the XUAR.<sup>8</sup> In reality, the Sitod is helping China's Party-state extinguish Uyghur culture in its rapidly escalating "People's War on Terror."

## DRAWING THE IRON CURTAIN: EARLY UYGHUR ACTIVISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

China's transnational repression of the Uyghurs began in 1990 in the frontier town of Baren in the Uyghur region. That year, Baren erupted into a violent conflict between locals and the PLA.<sup>9</sup> The rioting began on the night of April 5, 1990, after protesters launched an attack on a local police compound. Reporting at the time suggested that the Chinese military clashed with the protesters after they began applying the one-child policy to Muslim families, reversing their minority status exemption from state-mandated birth control policies. Official accounts stated that the incident was a premeditated attempt to destabilize the region, led by a pro-independence group known as the ETIP.<sup>10</sup> Both accounts likely contain a grain of truth, as protest leader Zäydin Yüsüp had been stockpiling weapons for a future "liberation struggle," according to Sean Roberts.<sup>11</sup> When the protests were met with police aggression, ETIP was ready to respond in kind. Although the details of the "Baren Incident" remain murky, what is known is that the uprising ended after the PLA was called in to storm the government compounds occupied by Uyghur, Tajik, and Kyrgyz protesters, leaving dozens of civilians dead.<sup>12</sup>

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8 Ramzy and Buckley "Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detention of Muslims."

9 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 125.

10 This should not be confused with the community that would later emerge in Afghanistan. The latter community adopted the name ETIP to honor what they perceived to be martyrs in Baren. For more please see chapter three.

11 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 53.

12 "People's Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region," Amnesty International, April 21, 1999, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3ae6a9eb0.pdf>.

**FIGURE 12:** Location of Baren Township within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



In the aftermath, Chinese security services arrested 1,831 Uyghurs after accusing them of having links to “separatist counter-revolutionary organizations.”<sup>13</sup> In 1991, over 10 percent of the region’s 25,000 Uyghur clerics were dismissed from work by China’s authorities, marking a shift back to hardline assimilationist policies.<sup>14</sup>

The collapse of the world Communist movement further altered China’s security considerations beyond its borders in Central Asia. To dilute autonomist sentiments, Beijing returned to centralized decision-making, reversing the XUAR’s reform and opening-era financial autonomy, and ramping up Han in-migration to tighten its grip. Externally, economic statecraft became a crucial tool in China’s mission to control discourse beyond its

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13 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 54.

14 Harris Lillian Craig, “Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China’s Policy in the Islamic World,” *China Quarterly* 113, (1993): 111–129.

borders.<sup>15</sup> Policymakers had begun to fear the consequences of a power vacuum in Central Asia and the possibility that it might radicalize the region's 300,000 strong Uyghur diaspora, a large number of whom had fled there from the famine of the Great Leap Forward and the violence of the Cultural Revolution (see chapter one).<sup>16</sup> Russia and China were united in their outlook, viewing secular autocrats as the safest counter-weight against religious and nationalist ideological contagion in Chechnya and the Uyghur region. Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev confirmed this shared interest during a 1992 press conference on Central Asia. He stated a "great closeness, if not a coincidence of positions on all the issues discussed."<sup>17</sup>

Several Uyghur nationalist organizations emerged in Central Asia in the 1990s, the majority of them based in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Some of these organizations were relics of the political machinations of the Sino-Soviet split, such as Yusupbek Mukhlisi's United Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan (URFET).<sup>18</sup> Mukhlisi remained a marginal figure in the Uyghur movement due to his commitment to armed struggle and was known for wildly exaggerating his militant credentials, according to historian James Millward.<sup>19</sup> Another notorious Uyghur organization throughout this decade was the East Turkestan Liberation Organization (ETLO), which was known more for its assassinations and kidnappings than its Uyghur advocacy.<sup>20</sup> The similarly named Uyghur Liberation Organization (ULO), founded by Soviet Uyghur-dissident Hashir Wahidi, was also relatively well-known in the 1990s. Like Mukhlisi, Wahidi was prone to exaggeration and claimed to have more than 1 million supporters in the Uyghur region and

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15 Kunal Mukherjee, "The Uyghur Question in Contemporary China," *Strategic Analysis* 34, (2010): 426.

16 This figure is based on the census from Kazakhstan (2014) with 246,777 self-reported ethnic Uyghurs and Kyrgyzstan 2020 with 59,367. The population in the rest of Central Asia is minimal.

17 Hasan Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China's Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009).

18 James Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, Policy Studies 6, (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2004), 25. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/violent-separatism-xinjiang-critical-assessment>.

19 Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, 25.

20 *Ibid.*, 24.

at least 12,000 across the rest of Central Asia.<sup>21</sup> In reality, these groups were marginal and hobbled by infighting and petty crime. Nevertheless, China continued to pay close attention to them and used economic incentives to encourage regional governments to crack down on Uyghur activism. This policy scored an early victory in 1995 when Kazakhstan's then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev signed an agreement with China to monitor the activity of Uyghurs within Kazakh borders and report findings to Beijing.<sup>22</sup>

Internally, the Chinese state tightened the screws even further. In 1996, "Document No.7" was leaked, providing insight into the PRC's systematic efforts to counter all forms of Uyghur religiosity or dissent and "integrate the region with the heartland."<sup>23</sup> The document instructed officials to "speed up economic development and improve the lives of people [living there]," referring to economic construction, reform, and deepening trade relations with Central Asia as the "basis for maintaining stability in Xinjiang."<sup>24</sup> The document also called for full-scale monitoring of overseas Uyghur activists and to use "all means available" to hinder their attempts to gain international attention. The document also confirmed China's broader agenda in Central Asia. "Take full advantage of our political superiority," it instructs, and "always maintain pressure [on Central Asia]."<sup>25</sup>

China pushed for the founding of the Shanghai Five grouping in 1996, consisting of the PRC, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, to resolve long-standing territorial disputes in the region—a legacy of the Great Game—to strengthen the XUAR's borders, and to allow China to reduce its military presence in the area.<sup>26</sup> Kazakhstan reached a territorial agreement with China in 1994 (implemented in 2002). The treaty assigned about 43 percent of the disputed territory to China. The Kazakh government spun the negotiations as a national victory that secured 57 percent of China's original claims.<sup>27</sup>

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21 Ibid., 26.

22 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 339.

23 Mukherjee, "The Uyghur Question in Contemporary China," 426.

24 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 55.

25 Ibid.

26 Bovingdon, *Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent*, 347.

27 Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies*, (Stockholm: Institute for Security, Development and Policy, 2009), 80.

Border disputes with Kyrgyzstan were addressed in two accords in 1996 and 1999 amid controversy. At its 2002 implementation, Kyrgyz then-President Askar Akayev insisted that the agreement was the best for which his country could hope.<sup>28</sup> However, the ratification sparked demonstrations all over Kyrgyzstan, with opposition activists claiming the ratification process did not meet the constitutional requirements of a two-thirds majority by both chambers of parliament.<sup>29</sup> After failing twice to approve the agreement, the Kyrgyzstan People's Assembly (the upper chamber) finally ratified the border agreement on May 17.<sup>30</sup> The last border dispute was resolved with Tajikistan in 2002 and approved by the Tajik parliament in 2011 under murky circumstances.<sup>31</sup> Activists say Tajik land was conceded to China in exchange for debt alleviation. Land issues remain a source of tension between China and the region today. According to Kazakhstan's Ministry of Regional Development, in 2014, 32 Chinese citizens rented just 4,750 hectares between them—an equivalent of 0.0002 percent of the country's total acreage.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, protests erupted in 2016 over fears that China would buy up land after the government proposed amending land laws to allow foreigners to rent plots for up to 25 years. The issue was so contentious that the state was forced to back down. My research for the Oxus Society's Central Asia Protest Tracker shows that there have been at least 106 "anti-China" protests in the region since January 2018, the majority of which concern fears about Chinese land acquisitions.<sup>33</sup>

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28 Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China's Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*.

29 M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton and New York: Princeton University Press, 2008), 127.

30 Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China's Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*.

31 Alexander Sodiqov, "Tajikistan Cedes Disputed Land to China," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 8, no. 16, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, January 24, 2011), <https://jamestown.org/program/tajikistan-cedes-disputed-land-to-china/>.

32 Bradley Jardine, "Why Are There Anti-China Protests in Central Asia?" *Washington Post*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/16/why-are-there-anti-china-protests-central-asia/>.

33 See "Central Asia Protest Tracker," Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, <https://oxussociety.org/viz/protest-tracker/>.

**FIGURE 13:** Current borders between post-Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan, and China. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



With secured borders, the Shanghai Five turned inward to concentrate on eradicating the “Three Evils.” The group (renamed the Shanghai Coordination Organization in 2001 and joined by Uzbekistan) proved an ideal platform through which China could pressure states to target Uyghurs. As early as April 1996, Kazakh then-Foreign Minister Kassym-Jomart Tokaev made a speech naming separatism as the “political AIDS” of the late-20th century.<sup>34</sup> Soon after, Kazakhstan shut down the ULO’s newspaper “*Uyghuristan*.” The rest of the region followed suit.<sup>35</sup> That same year, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice banned the political activities of “Ittipak” (Unity), including propaganda operations, insisting that the organization went against the “interests of the Chinese people.”<sup>36</sup> Uzbekistan, meanwhile, banned all Uyghur organizations, including purely cultural entities.

34 Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 340.

35 Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, 26.

36 Ibid.

Uyghur activism shifted its center of gravity further west into Europe and Turkey in response to this growing pressure (see chapter five).

These decisions proved profitable for regional elites. By 1997, the five Central Asian republics combined had 115 joint ventures with XUAR-based entities.<sup>37</sup> While minor as a trade partner for China as a whole, Central Asia accounted for 74 percent of the XUAR's international investments.<sup>38</sup> Trade volumes between China and Kazakhstan were the most dramatic, with cross-border trade between 1991 and 1997 worth \$3.68 billion USD.<sup>39</sup> Total trade skyrocketed over the next fifteen years, to \$11 billion USD by 2012.

## THE “THREE EVILS”: CHINA’S TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION IN EURASIA

While the Shanghai Five was consolidating its position in Central Asia, internal unrest in the XUAR encouraged certain factions of the Uyghur diaspora community to become more politically active. It started in 1997 in Ghulja (Yining), a frontier town near the Kazakh border. In the 1990s, Ghulja had become a bustling market of savvy, Russian-speaking intermediaries who facilitated trade between the Uyghur region and post-Soviet Central Asia. More importantly, Ghulja had the distinction of being the only city in the north of the XUAR to have a Uyghur majority (of the population of 330,000, 48 percent were Uyghur; 36 percent Han; the rest were Kazakh and Hui).<sup>40</sup> On February 4, 1997, China's police arrested youth activists across the city. The following day, 500 Uyghurs marched in solidarity with their detained friends and neighbors.<sup>41</sup> They were met by tear-gas, attack dogs, and rounds of live ammunition, causing panic, chaos, and death. Uyghurs allegedly torched vehicles, attacked Chinese residents, and flew banners and slogans calling for an independent East Turkestan.<sup>42</sup> The

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37 Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China's Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Nick Holdstock, *The Tree That Bleeds: A Uyghur Town on the Edge*, (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2011), 284.

41 Holdstock, *The Tree That Bleeds: A Uyghur Town on the Edge*.

42 Ibid.

unrest was eventually put to an abrupt end by local PLA and XPCC units, which imposed a military curfew

During the lockdown that followed the protests, XPCC units detained over 5,000 people and revived the Cultural Revolution-style show trials. Around 30 protesters were sentenced during a security service rally in Ghulja Stadium, with three given death sentences.<sup>43</sup> Others were driven through the streets in open trucks to show onlookers the price of dissent. Less than three weeks after the “Ghulja incident,” three bombs exploded on public transport in Ürümchi, killing nine people.<sup>44</sup> No organization claimed credit for the bombings but the fact they occurred on the same day as Deng Xiaoping’s funeral suggested a political motivation. The combined violence of the events in Ghulja and Ürümchi would result in the most intense security crackdown of the 1990s. The number of death sentences in the XUAR grew to be several times higher than any other Chinese region from 1997 to 1999, with Amnesty International recording 190 executions.<sup>45</sup>

The brutality of the crackdowns inspired several notable developments among Central Asia’s embattled Uyghur community. In March 1997, protesters gathered outside the Chinese Embassies in Bishkek and Almaty, prompting Beksultan Sarsekov, who was then secretary of Kazakhstan’s Security Council, to “express concern” about the “harsh measures” undertaken by China.<sup>46</sup> A small number of Uyghurs continued to protest outside regional Chinese Embassies throughout the summer. That same year, U.S. Congress approved the re-introduction of Uyghur-language broadcasting for *RFA*.<sup>47</sup>

China began to enhance security ties with the region in response to these developments. On June 3, 1998, the Shanghai Five convened in Kazakhstan

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43 Nick Holdstock, *The Tree That Bleeds: A Uyghur Town on the Edge*, 285.

44 Patrick Tyler, “In China’s Far West, Tensions With Ethnic Muslims Boil Over in Riots and Bombing,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/28/world/in-china-s-far-west-tensions-with-ethnic-muslims-boil-over-in-riots-and-bombings.html>.

45 “China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” Amnesty International, March 31, 1999, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/018/1999/en/>

46 Bruce Pannier, “Why Are Central Asian Countries Silent About China’s Uyghurs?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/why-are-central-asian-countries-silent-about-china-s-uyghurs-/30852452.html>.

47 Ibid.

to discuss joint strategies to counteract the “Three Evils” of “terrorism,” “separatism,” and “extremism.”<sup>48</sup> The following year, during a summit in Bishkek, the five partners agreed that each would never allow their territory to become a base for activities that could undermine the sovereignty of another.<sup>49</sup>

The “Three Evils” rhetoric conveniently blurs the conceptual boundaries between terrorism, separatism, and extremism and equates the threats posed by each. The SCO’s fifth summit, held on July 5, 2000, in Tajikistan, expanded the group’s policy remit. One of the first changes was the introduction of a new regional mechanism for the countries to cooperate on a multilateral basis—which formed the foundation for the group’s 2001 formalization as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>50</sup>

As the Shanghai Five transitioned toward a more institutionalized structure, a number of violent attacks on Uyghur organizers took place across Central Asia. Hashir Wahidi, the ULO founder, was savagely beaten in his home in Kazakhstan in 1998. He died from his injuries three months later.<sup>51</sup> In 2000, Ittipak president Nigmat Bazakov was assassinated in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>52</sup> According to police reports, he had been shot by members of the rival Uyghur organization ETLO after he refused to donate money to their cause.<sup>53</sup> Four ethnic Uyghurs were tried for the attack, including a Turkish citizen and three Chinese citizens. The same group of men was also accused of kidnapping a Chinese businessman and of attacking a Chinese government delegation in May 2000. The details of the case were inconsistent. In his analysis of these events, James Millward notes that one of the accused, Kasarji Jalal, had been serving time in prison at the time of Bazakov’s murder.<sup>54</sup> Beijing issued additional accounts that conflated

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48 Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China’s Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*.

49 Bovingdon, *Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent*.

50 Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Wang Pengxin, *Ethnic Identity and National Conflict in China*, (London: Springer, 2010), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057%2F9780230107878>.

51 Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, 26.

52 *Ibid.*, 26.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*, 20.

Central Asian Uyghur organizations, raising doubt about the charges.<sup>55</sup> In 2002, Kyrgyzstan extradited two of the accused, Mamet Yasin and Mamet Sadik, to China to face trial. A few days later, the Chinese MPS presented Kyrgyz police with 12 new police trucks during a televised event on the Sino-Kyrgyz border.<sup>56</sup>

Such reports should not be taken at face value. Incidents like these reveal the fraught diaspora politics and infighting of the Uyghurs from the 1990s to the early 2000s. The violence in many of the cases, such as Bazakov's assassination, indicate that criminal interests and turf wars are a more likely explanation than China's hand.<sup>57</sup> Uyghurs were and, to some extent, remain, a marginalized ethnic minority in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>58</sup> Police often misidentified Uyghurs as culprits in criminal cases or punished them for failure to pay bribes, according to Uyghurs I interviewed who spent time in the region in the 1990s.<sup>59</sup> Whatever the explanation for this spike in violence, such dynamics played in Beijing's favor, eliminating inconvenient activists, and providing a convenient justification for an expansive regional security agenda.

The launch of the U.S.-led GWOT provided the CCP with new opportunities to repress Uyghurs both internally and externally. In 2002, Beijing released the white paper "East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity."<sup>60</sup> According to an analysis of the documents by James Millward at the time, the white paper only provided details for 57 of the

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55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 26.

58 For more on recent ethnic clashes between Kazakhs and Uyghurs in Kazakhstan see Manas Kaiyrtayuly and Farangis Najibullah, "Life Returns 'To Normal,' But Divisions Remain in Kazakh Village After Ethnic Clashes," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhs-uyghurs-village-ethnic-tensions/31556879.html>. For more on Uyghur politics and identity in Kazakhstan, see Ablet Kamalov, "Identity of Kazakhstan's Uyghurs: Migration, Homeland, and Language," *Central Asian Affairs* 8, no. 4, (December 2021): 319–345, [https://brill.com/view/journals/caa/8/4/article-p319\\_2.xml?rskey=xnVD6j&result=9](https://brill.com/view/journals/caa/8/4/article-p319_2.xml?rskey=xnVD6j&result=9).

59 Abu Bakker Qassim, interview.

60 James Millward and Dahlia Peterson, "China's System of Oppression in Xinjiang: How It Developed and How to Curb It," *Global China*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, September 2020), <https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Chinas-System-of-Oppression-in-Xinjiang-How-It-Developed-and-How-to-Curb-It.pdf>.

162 deaths it reported, leaving the remaining 105 difficult to verify.<sup>61</sup> Of the 57 cases detailed, the majority were victims of small-scale murders such as poisonings and knife attacks.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, as international scholars have noted, the vast majority of the listed incidents appear no different from criminal acts that frequently occur across the rest of China.<sup>63</sup>

In August 2002, the governments of China and Kyrgyzstan, along with the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, claimed that “Uyghur terrorists” were plotting to attack the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek. No date or details beyond a mention of explosives were ever provided.<sup>64</sup> A U.S. Embassy spokesperson attributed the plans to the little-known Afghanistan-based group called the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, echoing the Chinese claim of 162 deaths made in the Chinese white paper on terror attacks.<sup>65</sup> While the PRC document had attributed these deaths to 40 different groups operating in the XUAR, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing blamed them all entirely on the obscure ETIM (see chapter three).<sup>66</sup> The U.S. Embassy in Bishkek never clarified the matter, raising further suspicions about whether the plan existed.<sup>67</sup> The Uyghurs accused in connection with the death of the Ittipak chairman, Mamed Sadyk and Mamed Yasin, were accused again of being involved in the plot against the U.S. Embassy. The primary piece of evidence against them is that they were carrying a map of Bishkek that contained a detailed list of foreign embassies.<sup>68</sup>

As China's government began playing up its Global War on Terror credentials, it intensified its security cooperation with Central Asia. In 2002, China provided over \$3 million USD in military aid to both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, receiving extradition agreements to return Uyghur “separatists

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61 Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, 12.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Todd Reed and Diana Raschke, *The ETIM: China's Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*, (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2010).

65 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 73.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 79.

and terrorists” in return.<sup>69</sup> China also signed further bilateral agreements with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to cooperate in the fight against the “Three Evils.”<sup>70</sup> The SCO also began organizing its first military exercises, marking the first instance of PLA units conducting joint activities with other countries. The first joint-training exercises took place in Kyrgyzstan just four months after the alleged planned attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek. Later that year, Chinese diplomat Wang Jianping, the first secretary of the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan, was killed in Bishkek while driving with a Uyghur businessman named Umar Nurmukhamedov.<sup>71</sup> Beijing investigated the likelihood of a terrorist connection but Kyrgyz police suggested that the murder was most likely a contract killing targeting the Uyghur businessman. This explanation was seemingly confirmed when a cache of forged passports was found in the trunk of the car, suggesting criminal networks were at work.<sup>72</sup>

In March 2003, another incident reportedly involving Uyghurs spurred further Sino-Kyrgyz security cooperation. A Kyrgyz bus was attacked on its way to China, leaving 19 Chinese citizens dead. Little was known about either the attackers or their motivations, but in July 2003, Kyrgyz police said the attackers were ETLO affiliates who had fled to Turkey.<sup>73</sup> Soon after, China hosted multinational military exercises on its territory for the first time, with more than 1,000 Chinese and Kyrgyz troops running counter-terrorism drills in the Uyghur region. Between October 2002 and August 2013, 13 field exercises were held across various national locations involving between 800 and 10,000 soldiers each time.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, Sino-Central Asian trade flows skyrocketed from \$456 million USD in 1998 to \$30.5 billion USD in 2008, the bulk of which came

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69 Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China's Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War*.

70 Michael Clarke, “China’s Strategy in ‘Greater Central Asia’: Is Afghanistan the Missing Link?” *Asian Affairs* 40, no. 1, (2013): 1–19, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00927678.2013.759443>.

71 Millward, *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*, 21–22.

72 *Ibid.*, 22.

73 *Ibid.*

74 Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, “Central Asia’s Multi-vector Defense Diplomacy,” *Kennan Cable* 68, Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, June 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-68-central-asias-multi-vector-defense-diplomacy>.

from energy contracts.<sup>75</sup> This growing economic relationship paid dividends for China's Uyghur strategy. In March 2006, Uzbek authorities arrested Hussein Celil (known to his family as Huseyincan Celil), a Uyghur with Canadian citizenship, who was later deported to China to face charges of "terrorism."<sup>76</sup> For the past 15 years, his wife Kamila Talendibaeva, and their four children have been fighting to raise awareness for his situation.<sup>77</sup> According to Amnesty International, Celil had fled China for Uzbekistan in the mid-1990s after authorities threatened him for promoting Uyghur rights. He then moved to Turkey before being accepted as a refugee by the Canadian government in 2001. He became a citizen in 2005.<sup>78</sup> After his extradition from Uzbekistan in 2006, China's government sentenced Celil to life imprisonment in a secret trial. It was later commuted to a 20-year sentence, according to Talendibaeva. The circumstances behind his extradition were suspicious: Celil had overstayed his visa while living in Uzbekistan to care for his child, who had fallen ill. China's government issued an Interpol Red Notice for alleged terrorism. The Uzbek government detained Celil for 90 days, before sending him to China in late June or early July 2006.<sup>79</sup> According to the former Canadian Ambassador to the PRC Guy Saint-Jacques, successive Canadian governments have raised Celil's case with their counterparts but, as of writing, Beijing continues to recognize him as a Chinese, not Canadian, citizen despite the fact he had previously renounced his Chinese citizenship.<sup>80</sup> Much Canadian political and media attention has been focused on Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, the "two Michaels," who were detained by the China's security services in December 2018 in retaliation for the arrest of a Huawei executive by Canadian police

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75 Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "How is Russia Responding to China's Creeping Security Presence in Central Asia?" *Russian Analytical Digest* 248, March 6, 2020, [https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD\\_248.pdf](https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD_248.pdf).

76 Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs*.

77 Asim Kashgarian, "Canadian Wife Fights for Uyghur Husband's Release From Chinese Prison," *Voice of America*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/canadian-wife-fights-for-uyghur-husband-s-release-from-chinese-prison-/6275896.html>.

78 "Huseyin Celil," Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.ca/huseyin-celil/>.

79 Kashgarian, "Canadian Wife Fights for Uyghur Husband's Release From Chinese Prison."

80 Ibid.

acting on a U.S. warrant. They were both released in September 2021, while Celil remains behind bars.<sup>81</sup>

In the years following, China's scrutiny of Uyghurs would grow. In the XUAR, then-CCP Xinjiang Secretary Wang Lequan declared a "life or death struggle" against terrorists in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Around 200,000 public security officers were instructed to punish families and their neighbors for "harboring terrorist suspects."<sup>82</sup> Official accounts claim that at least 1,300 Uyghurs were arrested for "state security crimes" in 2008<sup>83</sup> A violent incident occurred in Qāshqār during the Olympic opening ceremony on August 4: official accounts claim that two Uyghurs killed 16 soldiers by driving a truck into them and throwing explosives. However, eyewitnesses say no explosives were used.<sup>84</sup> Regardless of the contested details, the incident fed the hysteria surrounding the alleged "terrorist threat" to the games.

A growing fear of Uyghurs across China due to state propaganda fed into Han resentment, resulting in the tragic events of July 5, 2009, in Ürümchi. That evening, following a peaceful demonstration led by Uyghur university students, the streets of Ürümchi erupted into violence. For three days, groups of Han and Uyghur youth prowled the streets with spiked clubs and machetes hunting for one another, fierce street brawls. The state sided with the ethnic Han.<sup>85</sup> By the end, the streets were covered in skull fragments, broken bodies, and pools of blood.

The gruesome images of "7/5" were widely televised as "China's 9/11," invoking the specter of radical Islam. But far from a "premeditated act of terror orchestrated by anti-China forces abroad," as government documents later claimed, the intense street brawls, police brutality, and destruction of the city have all the hallmarks of an exploding powder-keg of grievances. Ethnic discrimination, economic marginalization, and invasive policing in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic games all played a role in laying the

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81 Ibid.

82 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 145.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 "China: The July 2009 protests in Xinjiang," *Amnesty International*, July 2, 2010, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA17/027/2010/en/>.

groundwork for the carnage that unfolded in Ürümchi that summer.<sup>86</sup> The number of arrests made in connection with the riots remains unknown, but reports from that time suggested at least 4,000 Uyghurs were detained.<sup>87</sup> A draconian media blackout was also imposed across the region the following year, including a full shutdown of the internet.<sup>88</sup> This act was the first of its kind and set a dangerous precedent around the world and such blackouts have since become a commonplace tactic used by authoritarian leaders.<sup>89</sup> Most significantly for transnational repression, the events in Ürümchi and the harsher security environment resulted in the most significant exodus of Uyghurs from the XUAR since 1962, with as many as 30,000 fleeing for Turkey through Pakistan and Southeast Asia over the next few years (see chapters three and four).<sup>90</sup>

The CCP dramatically enhanced security in the immediate aftermath of “7/5,” which resulted in further unrest. China’s internal security spending grew to 548.6 billion yuan—overtaking national defense spending for the first time in 2010.<sup>91</sup> Violent incidents resumed in parallel, with the bombing of a police station reported in Aksu.<sup>92</sup> While information is scarce, the attacks that occurred from 2010 to 2013 were between Uyghurs and security services, suggesting the violence was a response to the increasingly restrictive security environment. In the Aksu bombing, for example, a source interviewed by *RFA* at the time claimed that officers in the targeted station had regularly fined Uyghurs with beards and traditional head coverings,

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86 For more on the Ürümchi unrest, including the many disappearances and information lockdown that followed, see: “Can Anyone Hear Us? Voices from the 2009 Unrest in Urumchi,” Uyghur Human Rights Project, July 1, 2010, <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/CanAnyone-Hear-Us.pdf>.

87 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 148.

88 Edward Wong, “After Long Ban, Western China is Back Online,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/15/world/asia/15china.html>.

89 James Griffiths, “Internet Shutdowns Used to be Rare. They’re Increasingly Becoming the Norm in Much of the World,” *CNN*, December 21, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/21/asia/internet-shutdowns-china-india-censorship-intl-hnk/index.html>.

90 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 182.

91 Yitzhak Shichor, “Handling China’s Internal Security: Division of Labour Among Armed Forces in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119, (2019): 813–830, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2019.1580426?journalCode=cjcc20>.

92 Shichor, “Handling China’s Internal Security: Division of Labour Among Armed Forces in Xinjiang.”

fostering local resentment.<sup>93</sup> Although Chinese officials continued to mischaracterize these attacks as acts of Islamist terror, there was an increasingly political orientation to the violence in the Uyghur region.<sup>94</sup>

The government of Kazakhstan denied Ershidin Israel an exit visa after the UNHCR had granted him refugee status in March 2010, securing him the right to resettle in Sweden.<sup>95</sup> Israel had fled the Uyghur region for Kazakhstan in September 2009 and applied for asylum there shortly after he provided information to *RFA* about the security service's torture and extrajudicial killing of a Uyghur man named Shohret Tursun in the aftermath of events in Ürümqi. Kazakh authorities later detained Israel after Chinese authorities made an extradition request, accusing Israel of "terrorism." The government of Kazakhstan extradited him on May 30, 2011.<sup>96</sup> A Kazakh Foreign Ministry spokesperson interviewed about the matter said that China had provided "written guarantees that Israel would not be executed" upon his return and that the government of China had issued a Red Notice to Interpol.<sup>97</sup> On June 13, 2011, two weeks after Israel was extradited to China, China's government arrested one of his brothers (known only as Shemshiden), in Ürümqi for alleged "irregularities" in his vehicle repair business.<sup>98</sup>

Building on decades of economic statecraft in Central Asia, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping flew to Kazakhstan in 2013 to announce the launch of the BRI, a global infrastructure initiative that would connect trade routes across Eurasia (in addition to a network of shipping lanes and ports). Since its launch, the BRI has become the centerpiece of General Secretary Xi's ambitious drive to make China a global power.

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93 Ibid.

94 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 180.

95 Joshua Lipis "Deported Uyghur Faces terrorism Charges," *Radio Free Asia*, June 14, 2011, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/charges-06142011163646.html>.

96 Joshua Lipis "Deported Uyghur Faces terrorism Charges."

97 Ibid.

98 Another of his brothers, Envar Israel, had been detained in Israel's hometown of Ghulja immediately after the details of Tursun's torture and death had been leaked in 2009.

**FIGURE 14:** Map showing the importance of the Uyghur region to China's vision of global connectivity. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



Beijing hopes to quell unrest by better connecting the Uyghur region to both domestic and international markets. The growing influence of China as an economic partner around the world has brought with it an enhanced Chinese security presence that allows Beijing to surveil and repress Uyghurs far beyond its borders.

## **CASTING NETS FROM THE SKY: CHINA'S FORTRESS ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD**

High in the Pamir mountains, three lines of barbed-wire fencing run parallel across the snowy Kulma Pass, separating China from Tajikistan. The sparse no-man's land is just wide enough for military vehicles to conduct their patrols. Above them, on the Chinese side, a traditional-style pagoda, flanked by revolving surveillance cameras, watches over the beaten mountain roads. This fortification is the first line of offense in China's global "People's War on Terror," a campaign that has resulted in the largest mass incarceration of a minority since the Second World War.

The foundations for this international campaign of repression began in 2014 following CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping’s visit to the Uyghur region in the wake of the Kunming Attack—a coordinated mass stabbing by Uyghurs in southern China that left 31 dead. In secret speeches, China’s leader called for “absolutely no mercy” in a crackdown on Uyghur cultural and religious practices.<sup>99</sup> The campaign has resulted in cultural destruction,<sup>100</sup> extrajudicial mass internment,<sup>101</sup> indoctrination,<sup>102</sup> torture,<sup>103</sup> forced labor,<sup>104</sup> forced sterilization,<sup>105</sup> and regimentation of daily life under the world’s most sophisticated surveillance regime.<sup>106</sup> In addition,

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- 99 Ramzy and Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Documents Show How China Organized Mass Detention of Uyghurs.”
- 100 For more on this, see Nathan Ruser, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro, and Tilla Hoja, Cultural erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang, (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute: September 24 2020), <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>.
- 101 For more on internment camps, Gene A. Bunin, “The elephant in the XUAR: Brand new prisons, expanding old prisons, and hundreds of thousands of new inmates,” *Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia*, January 4, 2021, <https://livingotherwise.com/2021/01/04/the-elephant-in-the-xuar-ii-brand-new-prisons-expanding-old-prisons-and-hundreds-of-thousands-new-inmates/>; Dake Kang, “Room for 10,000: Inside China’s largest detention center,” *The Associated Press*, December 1, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/business-religion-china-only-on-ap-f89c20645e69208a416c64d229c072de>.
- 102 For more on the indoctrination programs in the XUAR, see Gerry Shih, “China’s mass indoctrination camps evoke Cultural Revolution,” *The Associated Press*, May 18, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/kazakhstan-ap-top-news-international-news-china-clamps-down-6e151296fb194f85ba69a8babd972e4b>; “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’: China’s Campaign of Mass Repression in Xinjiang,” Human Rights Watch September 9, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs#>; Adrian Zenz, “‘Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude’: China’s political re-education campaign in Xinjiang,” *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1, (2019):102–128.
- 103 For more on this, see Rebecca Wright, Ivan Watson and Zahid Mahmood, “‘Some of Them are Psychopaths’: Chinese Detective in Exile Reveals Torture Against Uyghurs,” *CNN*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/04/china/xinjiang-detective-torture-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.
- 104 For more on this, see Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, Danielle Cave, James Leibold, et. al., Uyghurs for sale: ‘re-education, forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang, (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 1, 2020), <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>.
- 105 For more on this, see “Ferocious birth-control policies in Xinjiang are racially targeted,” *The Economist*, June 26, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/06/26/ferocious-birth-control-policies-in-xinjiang-are-rationally-targeted>.
- 106 For more on digital surveillance, see “China: Big data program targets Xinjiang’s

some 1.8 million people, around 10 percent of the Uyghur population, have been interned in concentration camps the government euphemistically refers to as “re-education centers.”<sup>107</sup>

This campaign is international in scope. “After the United States pulls out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate Central Asia,” Xi Jinping told local officials in the XUAR in 2014.<sup>108</sup> In particular, Xi warned that Uyghur militants returning from Syria (see chapter four) might use the Wakhan Corridor to project force into the Uyghur region and destabilize China.<sup>109</sup> He later called for “nets cast from the earth to the sky” in China’s hunt for Uyghur dissidents around the globe.<sup>110</sup> The resulting spread of China’s preemptive security dragnet into Tajikistan has had a devastating impact on the Uyghur diaspora. According to confidential International Criminal Court documents I have reviewed, Tajikistan began mass arrests and refoulements of Uyghurs in 2016 after a series of calls was sent to that community with urgent requests from family members in the XUAR imploring them to return home.

Chinese authorities threatened to harm the families of those who refused to return to the Uyghur region. The Chinese Consulate in Tajikistan allegedly denied Uyghurs visa extensions and work permits. In tandem, Chinese PSB operatives reportedly conducted raids with their Tajik counterparts in the State Committee for National Security against anyone whose paperwork had expired. There is evidence that entire Tajik bazaars were blocked off to Uyghurs by Tajik police, including Dushanbe’s Korvon Bazaar and the central bazaars in Qurghonteppa and Khujand, with dire consequences for Uyghurs living in these border regions. The ICC filings argue that the

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Muslims,” Human Rights Watch, December 9, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/09/china-big-data-program-targets-xinjiangs-muslims#:~:text=Human%20Rights%20Watch%20first%20reported,those%20it%20deems%20potentially%20threatening.>

107 Ramzy and Buckley, “Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Documents Show How China Organized Mass Detention of Uyghurs.”

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Jardine and Evans, “*Nets Cast from the Earth to the Sky*”: China’s Hunt for Pakistan’s Uyghurs.

number of Uyghurs living in Tajikistan has been “reduced from 3,000 to 100 in the past 15 years, with most of the reduction happening in 2016–2018.”<sup>111</sup> These practices outlined in the ICC findings strongly correlate to the practices of transnational repression documented in the China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset (see typologies on page X).<sup>112</sup>

The rapid removal of the Uyghur population followed several secret agreements between the two countries in 2016, giving China the right to refurbish or build up to 40 guard posts on Tajik territory on the border with Afghanistan and set up strategic military facilities in Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast.<sup>113</sup> Alongside this capacity building, China has conducted joint military exercises with its Tajik counterparts. The powerful MPS performed its first overseas training exercises in a mountain facility outside the capital, Dushanbe in 2016.<sup>114</sup> Further, China has brought Tajikistan within the fold of its South Asian security architecture. In 2016, it became a co-founder of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in partnership with China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The organization acts as a clearinghouse for intelligence-sharing and counterterrorism training, further advancing security cooperation in the region.<sup>115</sup>

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111 “Lawyers Urge ICC to Probe Alleged Forced Deportations of Uyghurs from Tajikistan,” *Reuters*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/lawyers-urge-icc-probe-alleged-forced-deportations-uyghurs-tajikistan-2021-06-10/>.

112 “China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset.”

113 Craig Nelson and Thomas Grove, “Russia, China Vie for Influence in Central Asia as the U.S. Plans Afghan Exit,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-china-vie-for-influence-in-central-asia-as-u-s-plans-afghan-exit-11560850203>.

114 Lemon and Jardine, “Central Asia’s Multi-vector Defense Diplomacy.”

115 *Ibid.*

**FIGURE 15:** Location of China's strategic facilities in Tajikistan overlooking Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, near the Chinese border. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



In lock-step with power projection into Central and South Asia, China's government has been ramping up security in the Uyghur region itself. On August 29, 2016, China appointed Chen Quanguo<sup>116</sup> as regional Party Secretary of the XUAR, marking the start of a turn toward full Orwellianism.<sup>117</sup> The surveillance system implemented by Chen includes a database of Uyghur region residents that intrusively monitors habits, religiosity, and other personal traits to assess "loyalty" to the Party and state (see chapter five).<sup>118</sup> Events in Central Asia have worked to reinforce these extreme measures. On August 30, 2016, exactly one day after Chen took

116 For more on Chen, see "Chen Quanguo: The strongman Behind Beijing's securitization strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," China Brief 17, no. 12, (Jamestown Foundation: Washington, DC), [https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_f\\_tk=yfWp6z75Zt0cQmcj8cLAUjqa3Wj3gshMxCR52Q3ohqA-1642466311-0-gaNycGzNCVE](https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/?__cf_chl_f_tk=yfWp6z75Zt0cQmcj8cLAUjqa3Wj3gshMxCR52Q3ohqA-1642466311-0-gaNycGzNCVE).

117 Raffi Khatchadourian, "Surviving the Crackdown in Xinjiang," *New Yorker*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/12/surviving-the-crackdown-in-xinjiang>

118 Raffi Khatchadourian, "Surviving the Crackdown in Xinjiang."

over governance of the XUAR, a suicide bomber rammed a car filled with explosives into the Chinese Embassy compound in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>119</sup> Kyrgyz police identified the deceased attacker as Zoir Khalilov, a Uyghur with Tajik citizenship they alleged had been in contact with the Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front—an ally of the TIP.<sup>120</sup> Three Kyrgyz citizens were later convicted of ordering and financing the attack.<sup>121</sup> The details of the plot changed dramatically over the course of the investigation and many contradictory explanations were posited.<sup>122</sup> The attack was never claimed by TIP or Uyghur militants. Whatever the motivations, the incident ultimately served to expand China's security presence in the region.

In the Uyghur region, Chen advertised 100,680 new security jobs in 2016 to “eradicate the Three Evils”—a thirteenfold increase from the 2009–2014 period when security spiked in response to the Ürümchi events.<sup>123</sup> The majority of these (86 percent) were for “police assistant” positions to manage the new “convenience police stations”<sup>124</sup> that would blanket major Uyghur cities to run regular background checks on inhabitants.<sup>125</sup> For the XUAR government, the emphasis after that year was on “placing stability

119 “Chinese Embassy Blast: Car Bomb Attack in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan,” *BBC*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37217712>.

120 Olga Dzubenko, “Kyrgyzstan Says Uyghur Militant Groups Behind Attack on Chinese Embassy,” *Reuters*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-blast-china/kyrgyzstan-says-uighur-militant-groups-behind-attack-on-chinas-embassy-idUSKCN11C1DK>.

121 Sean Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 205.

122 The connection between the groups appears to have been the Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad, an Al-Nusra affiliate led by Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov, an ethnic Uzbek from southern Kyrgyzstan (better known as Abu Saloh). See Catherine Putz, “2020 Edition: Which Countries Are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?” *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>

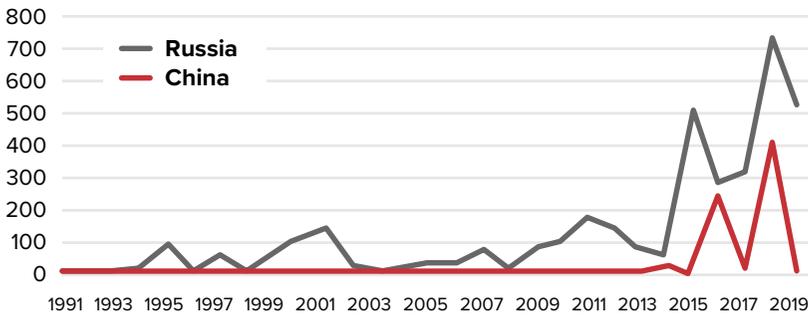
123 Sean Roberts, “The Biopolitics of China's ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs.”

124 For more on these, see Minxin Pei, “Grid management: China's latest institutional tool of social control,” *China Leadership Monitor* 1, March 1, 2021, <https://www.prleader.org/pei-grid-management>.

125 Adrian Zenz, “Securitizing Xinjiang: Police Recruitment, Informal Policing, and Ethnic Minority Co-optation,” *The China Quarterly* 242, (2019): 1–25, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/abs/securitizing-xinjiang-police-recruitment-informal-policing-and-ethnic-minority-cooptation/FEEC613414AA33A0353949F9B791E733>.

above all else.”<sup>126</sup> Unlike the 2009–2014 period, however, the new security model had profound implications for China’s surrounding neighborhood, with arms transfers to Central Asia rising dramatically from 2014 to 2019. According to my recent findings, China has transferred \$717 million USD in arms to Central Asia since 2000, with 97 percent occurring after the 2014 declaration of the “People’s War on Terror.”<sup>127</sup> Regional security cooperation and joint-training exercises have also expanded dramatically.

**FIGURE 16:** Arms Sales to Central Asia in USD. Note the spike in China’s sales in 2014, immediately following the declaration of the People’s War on Terror in the XUAR.<sup>128</sup>



In 2016, China established a number of training centers in the region, including a new institute within Kazakhstan’s University of Defense. Security entities in Beijing also began to cooperate more with their Central Asian counterparts: the Chinese Criminal Police Academy started to cooperate with its Kazakh counterpart on border security training courses; the People’s Public Security University of China, run by China’s MPS, and

126 Sean Roberts, “The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs.”

127 Ibid.

128 Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, “In Russia’s Shadow: China’s Rising Security Presence in Central Asia,” *Kenan Cable* 52, Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, May 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-52-russias-shadow-chinas-rising-security-presencecentral-Asia>.

its Uzbek counterpart have been official partners since May 2017.<sup>129</sup> Since then, China has hosted 213 Uzbek Ministry of Internal Affairs employees for 38 briefings on counterterrorism and drug trafficking.<sup>130</sup>

The SCO has also organized a number of important exchange programs in Central Asia since 2014. That year, the MPS founded an institute to train SCO senior officials on counterterrorism and transnational crime, the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai.<sup>131</sup> The institute claims to have trained some 300 officials from SCO member states from 2014 to 2018 and announced in June 2018 that it would train 2,000 officials from all SCO countries by June 2021. In 2019, the SCO launched “Cooperation 2019” —a series of drills between partner states. These drills were meant to enhance the interoperability of Central Asian paramilitary units with the PAP, and included Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, marking the first time their national guard units had trained with the PAP on counterterrorism.<sup>132</sup>

China’s regional surveillance capabilities in the region have also grown. In 2019, Kyrgyzstan opened a new police command center in Bishkek that included facial recognition-capable cameras supplied by the defense firm China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation.<sup>133</sup> Meanwhile, another surveillance firm Hikvision—which advertises products with the ability to ethnically distinguish Uyghur targets in a crowd—has established itself as a major smart city technology supplier for Kazakh cities like Almaty and Shymkent.<sup>134</sup> The Kazakh government has committed itself to install 4,000 surveillance cameras in the capital Nur-Sultan (Astana), the majority of them supplied by Hikvision.<sup>135</sup> Tajikistan has also been experimenting

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129 Jardine and Lemon, “In Russia’s Shadow: China’s Rising Security Presence in Central Asia.”

130 Dirk van der Kley, *China’s Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor*, (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, September 3, 2019), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-security-activities-in-tajikistan-and-afghanistans-wakhan-corridor/>.

131 van der Kley, *China’s Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor*.

132 Ibid.

133 Bradley Jardine, “China’s Surveillance State has Eyes on Central Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/15/huawei-xinjiang-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-china-surveillance-state-eyes-central-asia/>.

134 Bradley Jardine, “China’s Surveillance State has Eyes on Central Asia.”

135 Ibid

with Chinese tech, announcing its new identification system for cellphone users in February 2019, which required consumers to provide fingerprints and medical information in order to receive SIM cards.<sup>136</sup> The main supplier for this project was the PLA-linked tech giant Huawei. Beijing used tech diplomacy to establish relations with neighboring security services, sending a fleet of facial-recognition capable buses to Uzbekistan's police force.<sup>137</sup> A 2019 *Guardian* investigation revealed that Chinese border guards have installed surveillance apps onto the phones of people entering the XUAR from Central Asia at the Irkeshtam border crossing in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>138</sup> These apps can search through data from phones and retrieve information, including the content of apps, messages, contacts, and information about the phone itself. The app specifically looks for information on the Qu'ran, the Dalai Lama, and any content related to weapon operations.<sup>139</sup>

This intensification of security policies across the Uyghur region and post-Soviet Central Asia had a devastating impact on human rights. 68 incidents of Uyghurs facing detention, coercion to return, or refolement took place in Kyrgyzstan alone. During the academic break between the fall and spring semesters of 2016 and 2017, 54 Uyghur and ethnically Kyrgyz students and professors returned to the XUAR from Kyrgyzstan to “register” themselves, to visit their families, or to update their travel documents.<sup>140</sup> Many of the students were later expelled from their institutions in Kyrgyzstan after they did not return for classes and failed to pay their tuition.

In 2017, Chinese police called Seyit'akhun Abdukerim, a Uyghur trader in Kyrgyzstan, back to his hometown of Atush in the XUAR. He heeded the call and was arrested upon his arrival.<sup>141</sup> The police demanded

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136 Ibid.

137 Ibid.

138 Osborne and Cutler, “Chinese Border Guards Put Secret Surveillance Apps Onto Tourists’ Phones.”

139 Ibid.

140 Eugene Bunin, “Kyrgyz Students Vanish into Xinjiang’s Maw,” *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/31/963451-kyrgyz-xinjiang-students-camps/>.

141 “Five Uyghurs From One Family Imprisoned for Egypt Study, Another Believed to Have Died in Camps,” *Radio Free Asia*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/egypt-03052021184200.html>.

that he call his sons, studying abroad in Egypt, to demand their return to the Uyghur region. Abdukerim was then sentenced to 18 years in prison for having sent his children abroad.<sup>142</sup> Imran and Madina Hekimjan, and Ilham Qari, relatives of Abdukerim and his sons, were likewise summoned back to the XUAR from their studies in Egypt. Like their relatives, China's government detained and later imprisoned them.<sup>143</sup> Ilham Qari was later reported to have died in one of the camps.<sup>144</sup>

In addition to directly participating in China's campaign of transnational repression, Tajikistan has also acted as an intermediary for transnational repression on behalf of Turkey. Zinnetgul Tursun and her two daughters were detained in Turkey and sent to the notorious Izmir prison near Istanbul.<sup>145</sup> They were given falsified Tajik documents and declared to be Tajik nationals, despite being legal Turkish residents. They were then deported to Tajikistan, where they were taken by another plane to Ürümchi.<sup>146</sup>

Tales from those who fled the Uyghur region's camps have shocked the world. In the summer of 2018, Chinese Kazakh Sayragul Sauytbay, a former elementary teacher forced to work in the camps, managed to flee across the border into Kazakhstan to be reunited with her husband and children.<sup>147</sup> Her testimony, given in a packed courtroom in a tiny Kazakh border town, made global headlines, as she confirmed stories of rampant abuse that Beijing had long denied. Relying on its decades-long strategies of transnational repression, China called on the Kazakh government to extradite Sauytbay to China, where she would be silenced. The government of Kazakhstan tried her for illegally crossing the border, but refused to extradite her. However, they refused to offer her asylum.<sup>148</sup> In June 2019, she fled

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142 "Five Uyghurs From One Family Imprisoned for Egypt Study, Another Believed to Have Died in Camps."

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid.

145 "Uyghur Mother, Daughters Deported to China From Turkey," *Radio Free Asia*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deportation-08092019171834.html>.

146 "Uyghur Mother, Daughters Deported to China From Turkey."

147 Matt Rivers, "Former Xinjiang Teacher Claims Brainwashing and Abuse Inside Mass Detention Centers," *CNN*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/09/asia/xinjiang-china-kazakhstan-detention-intl/index.html>

148 Rivers, "Former Xinjiang Teacher Claims Brainwashing and Abuse Inside Mass Detention Centers."

Kazakhstan for Sweden—one of the few countries that provide Uyghurs protected status—where she was granted asylum and now lives.

Tursunay Ziyawudun had moved from the Uyghur region to Kazakhstan to live with her Kazakh husband in 2011.<sup>149</sup> In 2016, she returned to the XUAR to renew her Kazakh visa. Chinese authorities drew out the renewal process, and in April 2017, Ziyawudun was arrested by the police and taken to a re-education center, where she remained until May 2017.<sup>150</sup> She was then informed that while her husband could return to Kazakhstan, she could not. In March 2018, nearly a year after she had arrived in the XUAR, China's government arrested her again and took her to another re-education center. There she witnessed and was subject to the violence of China's government, including torture and sexual assault. Finally, in December 2018, Ziyawudun was released. During her detention, her husband had fought for her freedom, pleading with the government of Kazakhstan to negotiate with China for her release.<sup>151</sup> Ziyawudun was forced to live in the XUAR for another nine months and was only allowed to return to Kazakhstan in September 2019, where she was monitored and surveilled until she fled to the U.S. in 2020. Ziyawudun has since become a powerful advocate for those still in the camps, testifying to governments and legislative bodies all over the world.<sup>152</sup>

In May 2018, Qaisha Akhan fled the XUAR to Kazakhstan after learning that she would soon be detained in a re-education center. She received a temporary asylum seeker certificate to prevent her from being deported, but the government of Kazakhstan does not guarantee any additional protections or the right to work in Kazakhstan. In October 2020, after serving a six-month prison sentence for illegally crossing the border, Akhan was again granted temporary refugee status for an additional year.<sup>153</sup> In January 2021,

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149 Megha Rajagopalan, "Uyghur Woman Who Was at Risk of Being Forcibly Sent Back to China and Detained has Arrived Safely in the U.S.," *Buzzfeed News*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/uyghur-woman-tursunay-ziyawudun-us-kazakhstan-china>

150 Rajagopalan, "Uyghur Woman Who Was at Risk of Being Forcibly Sent Back to China and Detained has Arrived Safely in the U.S."

151 *Ibid.*

152 *Ibid.*

153 "Two Ethnic Kazakhs From China Violently Attacked in Kazakhstan," *Radio Free Europe!*

she was beaten, strangled, and hospitalized by an unknown assailant.<sup>154</sup> In October 2019, Murager Alimuly and Qaster Musakhanuly fled Xinjiang for Kazakhstan. In January 2020, Alimuly, Musakhanuly, and another escapee, Tabarak, were charged with illegally crossing the Sino-Kazakh border, and told that while they would not be deported, they would have to serve one year in prison. Similar to Akhan, they were not granted full asylum by the government of Kazakhstan, only temporary asylum, set to last for one year.<sup>155</sup> The fight of these Kazakhs to win asylum in Kazakhstan has mobilized activists across the country, many of whom are concerned about the fate of relatives across the border in the XUAR.<sup>156</sup>

In March 2019, Kazakhstan's National Security Committee detained Serikhzhan Bilash, an ethnic Kazakh activist whose organization Atajurt Eriktileri had been collecting testimonies from Uyghurs about their experiences in the XUAR's reeducation camps. This groundbreaking work had given the world a window into the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding across the border in China.<sup>157</sup> His work had proved to be a major inconvenience for the governments in Nur-Sultan (Astana) and Beijing. Bilash was released by August 2019 after he had been held for five months on accusations of having "incited ethnic strife" against the Chinese people. Though he would tell supporters his acquittal was a "victory for the people," the reality is that Beijing won the battle to silence his activism.<sup>158</sup> He continued to face legal troubles afterward when his own government blacklisted him as a "terrorist."<sup>159</sup> This resulted in continued

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*Radio Liberty*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ethnic-kazakhs-attacked-china-xinjiang/31063436.html>.

154 "Two Ethnic Kazakhs From China Violently Attacked in Kazakhstan."

155 "Two Ethnic Kazakhs From Xinjiang Obtain Temporary Refugee Status in Kazakhstan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/two-ethnic-kazakhs-from-xinjiang-obtain-rare-temporary-refugee-status-in-kazakhstan/30900758.html>.

156 "Two Ethnic Kazakhs From Xinjiang Obtain Temporary Refugee Status in Kazakhstan."

157 "Xinjiang Activist Detained in Kazakhstan, Accused of Sowing Discord," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 10, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-xinjiang-activist-detained-accused-of-sowing-discord-/29813145.html>.

158 Reid Standish, "Our Government Doesn't Want to Spoil Relations with China," *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/china-xinjiang-uyghur-kazakhstan/597106/>

159 Standish, "Our Government Doesn't Want to Spoil Relations with China."

harassment, including having his assets frozen and his car impounded by Kazakh security services. He has since immigrated to Turkey and then to the United States, where he was living as of June 2021.<sup>160</sup> Bilash's case reflects China's growing influence worldwide and offers insight into how it manages discourse. The video testimonials are hosted on Atajurt's YouTube page, which was taken down before being brought back with content missing.<sup>161</sup> YouTube representatives explained that this was due to YouTube's guidelines on sharing personal information and doxxing, but Google has long had an ambiguous relationship towards CCP directed censorship.<sup>162</sup> While Atajurt Eriktileri is the most well-known of the civil society groups focused on bringing attention to the plight of Kazakhs and Uyghurs living on the other side of the border, it is one of many groups—most unofficial—who are protesting Kazakhstan's engagement with China and drawing attention to the absence of family members and friends who disappeared into the XUAR.

Baibolat Kunbolat, a Nagyż Atajurt (a successor organization to the original Atajurt) activist from the XUAR, has protested with a small group outside the Chinese consulate in Almaty nearly every day since spring 2020 for his brother's freedom and that of others imprisoned in the XUAR.<sup>163</sup> Since his protest in February 2021, Kunbolat has been arrested twice, along with his mother and other activists.<sup>164</sup> Kazakhs are the second-largest ethnic minority in the XUAR, with a population of nearly 2 million. According to my research as part of the team that designed the Oxus

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160 "Kazakhstan: Researcher on Xinjiang Crimes Banned," Human Rights Watch, September 8, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/node/379851/printable/print>.

161 Colleen Wood, "Why Atajurt's Brief YouTube Suspension Matters," *The Diplomat*, June 23, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/why-atajurts-brief-youtube-suspension-matters/>.

162 Alexandra Ma, "It Looks as if China Laid Out How Google Can Help it Persecute Uyghur Minority," *Business Insider*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-likely-laid-out-how-google-can-help-persecute-uyghur-minority-2018-10>.

163 "Kazakhstan: Activist Detained for Hypothetical Anti-China Picket," *Eurasianet*, July 1, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-activist-detained-for-hypothetical-anti-china-picket>; "Your Heart Might Stop: Kazakh from Xinjiang Threatened After Pressing Chinese Diplomats about Missing Brother," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-xinjiang-kazakhstan-missing-threats-protests/31157124.html>.

164 "Kazakhstan: Activist Detained for Hypothetical Anti-China Picket."

Society's Central Asia Protest Tracker, 106 protests related to China took place in Kazakhstan from January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2020.<sup>165</sup> In January 2019, the Kazakhstani Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it had secured the release of some 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs in China, a move that appeared designed to defuse public tensions back home.<sup>166</sup>

China is also closely following the security situation unfolding in South Asia in the aftermath of the August 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. In the lead-up to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and its aftermath, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan conducted military drills with neighboring Russia and China.<sup>167</sup> While Central Asia has softened its rhetoric toward the militants, Tajikistan has maintained a critical stance. President Rahmon reportedly expressed concern about terrorist groups along the Tajik border at the August 6 summit of Central Asian leaders in Turkmenistan.<sup>168</sup>

High in the Pamir mountains bordering Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China, the Wakhan Corridor was initially created by Russian and British planners to buffer their empires. In July 2021, the Taliban took the strategic Wakhan Corridor for the first time.<sup>169</sup> Previously, the corridor had been considered too mountainous and too remote for the militant Islamic group to take and hold. In a bid to take the entire country, the Taliban entered to negotiate the surrender of the corridor. The Wakhan Corridor has long been a space of contestation and negotiation, with a complex array of trans-border identities at play. For the PRC, the Taliban taking Wakhan acts as a necessary stabilizing force but poses a unique set of threats. During a summit with the Taliban later in July 2021, the Taliban assured the PRC that they would not become involved in "China's internal affairs," further vowing that Afghan soil would not become the launch point for violence

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165 "Central Asia Protest Tracker," Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, December 31, 2020, <https://oxussociety.org/viz/protest-tracker/>.

166 Dake Kang, "China Allowing 2,000 Ethnic Kazakhs to Leave Xinjiang Region," *Associated Press*, January 9, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/kazakhstan-ap-top-news-international-news-asia-china-6c0a9dcdd7bd4a0b85a0bc96ef3dd6f2>.

167 Kang, "China Allowing 2,000 Ethnic Kazakhs to Leave Xinjiang Region."

168 *Ibid.*

169 Andrew E. Kramer, "These Herders Lived in Peaceful Isolation, Now War Has Found Them," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/29/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-refugees.html>.

within China.<sup>170</sup> The Taliban also promised the Russian government not to push into Central Asia, arguing that they desired only to create an Islamic government within the borders of Afghanistan.<sup>171</sup>

The reality of the Taliban's close relationship with extremist organizations, including Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, as well as the potential for conflict with the Islamic State Khorasan Province, still troubles watchers in Russia, China, and the United States. Chinese government outlets have expressed concern that these other terrorist organizations have made no promises about not becoming involved in the XUAR and may seek to recruit Uyghurs to their cause or otherwise involve themselves. In recent years, Chinese patrols of Wakhan have increased in connection with the Tajik base Sitod and concerns of Uyghurs escaping into Afghanistan—the border has been rendered all but impassable and will likely remain so. China's efforts to extend its dragnet into Central Asia and securitize the region have been highly successful to date and present a likely model for the future of South Asia.

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170 Steven Lee Myers, "China Offers Taliban Warm Welcome While Urging Peace Talks," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/world/asia/china-taliban-afghanistan.html>.

171 Myers, "China Offers Taliban Warm Welcome While Urging Peace Talks."

## CHAPTER THREE

# Operation Silence

**“Calamity and happiness have no volition. Man brings them on himself. Go in a flaxen cape to put out a fire, and you’ll be consumed by flames.”**

Shi Nai’an, *The Water Margin*

**ISLAMABAD’S LAL MASJID** (Red Mosque) is a sprawling complex less than a mile from Pakistan’s Supreme Court and just a few blocks from the headquarters of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. In the months leading up to June 23, 2007, the mosque became a political time-bomb, and that night, it tore Pakistan’s social fabric asunder.

By early 2007, the Red Mosque had established itself as the center of revolutionary Islamic activity. The mosque hosted Taliban-style vigilante squads, led by aggressive, bamboo staff-wielding women dressed in *burkas*.<sup>1</sup> Day after day, on Islamabad’s bustling streets, the vigilantes terrorized local businesspeople, destroyed books and CDs deemed “un-Islamic,” and kidnapped young women they suspected of prostitution.<sup>2</sup> The government did nothing. Even after the women ransacked the offices of the “infidel” political establishment, and even after declaring the founding of a *shariah*-ruled statelet in the confines of a children’s library outside the country’s parliament, there was no official response.<sup>3</sup>

On June 23, the vigilantes crossed an unwritten red-line in Pakistani politics: never anger China. That day, the women entered a massage parlor in sector F-8, one of the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods, and dragged

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- 1 Somini Sengupta, “Red Mosque Fueled Islamic Fire in Young Women,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/24/world/asia/24madrasa.html>
  - 2 Kamran Haider, “Radical Students Protest at Pakistan’s Red Mosque,” *Reuters*, July 27, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-28685920070727>
  - 3 Haider, “Radical Students Protest at Pakistan’s Red Mosque.”

six Chinese women from the building and held them hostage.<sup>4</sup> The group justified the action by arguing that the parlor was being used as a brothel. In Beijing, the CCP was placed in an awkward position between appeasing the Chinese public, some of whom demanded military intervention, and criticizing their ally.<sup>5</sup> The longer they waited, the bolder the public would become in demanding retribution.<sup>6</sup>

Across the border, Pakistan's ruler Pervez Musharraf was forced to act. From June 25 to 28, Islamabad dispatched Interior Minister Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao to Beijing to propose renewed bilateral efforts to counter terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Upon his return, Sherpao informed his government that China's authorities believed the raids to be the work of Uyghur students who had gone to Pakistan and joined ETIM.<sup>8</sup> Uncharacteristically, Beijing accused Islamabad of negligence and, even more pointedly, of "harboring enemies of the Chinese state." Alarmed by the rhetoric coming from Beijing, Musharraf decided to launch "Operation Silence," a violent eight-day siege on the mosque.<sup>9</sup>

On July 3, Pakistani rangers lay razor wire in front of Lal Masjid as militants inside opened fire. In the ensuing melee, an officer was killed and the nearby headquarters of the Ministry of Environment was reduced to rubble.<sup>10</sup> By nightfall, the vigilantes had hunkered down behind the mosque's famous crimson walls. For eight nights, gunfire between rangers and militants cracked through the city streets, the thick darkness punctured by the glow

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4 Howard W. French, "Letter From China: Mosque Siege Reveals the China Connection," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/12/world/asia/12iht-letter.1.6629789.html>

5 French, "Letter From China: Mosque Siege Reveals the China Connection."

6 Andrew Small, *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, May 2015), 67–93, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210755.001.0001/acprof-9780190210755>.

7 "China Urges Pakistan to Ensure Security of Chinese After Hostage Issue," *Xinhua News Agency*, June 27, 2007, [http://en.people.cn/200706/27/eng20070627\\_387969.html](http://en.people.cn/200706/27/eng20070627_387969.html).

8 "China Urges Pakistan to Ensure Security of Chinese After Hostage Issue."

9 "Amnesty International Report 2008 – Pakistan," *Amnesty International*, May 28, 2008, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/483e27a656.html>.

10 William Dalrymple, "Days of Rage," *New Yorker*, July 16, 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/07/23/days-of-rage>.

of explosives lobbed by Pakistani soldiers into the mosque's compound.<sup>11</sup> As the dust settled, the toll of the violence became known: at least 103 people had been killed, including women and children. Some accounts put the massacre at several hundred dead.<sup>12</sup> 12 were reportedly Uyghurs.<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International labeled the killings by the Pakistani security forces as an "excessive use of force."<sup>14</sup>

The siege also had a profound impact on Pakistan's politics. Following the events, a number of pro-Taliban groups blocked off the Karakoram Highway leading to China.<sup>15</sup> These same forces annulled their peace agreement with Musharraf's government in December 2007 and reorganized themselves as the Tehrik-i-Taliban-Pakistan, or, the Pakistani Taliban. Within two years, they occupied territory within 60 miles of Islamabad.<sup>16</sup>

As Beijing has grown more active in the politics of neighboring states like Pakistan, it has disrupted internal balances of power, creating conditions in which anti-China sentiments can spread. Operation Silence signaled growing Chinese influence in South Asia, and the consequences of this influence are still being felt across the region.

## CROSSING THE KHUNJERAB: THE UYGHURS IN SOUTH ASIA

Often dubbed the "eighth wonder of the world," the Karakoram Highway is a powerful symbol of China's often troubled relationship with Pakistan—a dynamic so complex, Communist officials have joked that the Islamic Republic is "China's Israel."<sup>17</sup> More than a thousand Chinese workers

11 Dalrymple, "Days of Rage."

12 "The aftershocks," *Jang*, July 7, 2010, <https://jang.com.pk/thenews/jul2010-weekly/nos-04-07-2010/spr.htm>.

13 "Pakistan Bombings Raise Fears of Taliban, al Qaeda Resurgence," *CNN*, July 16, 2007, <https://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/07/16/pakistan.alqaeda/index.html>

14 "Amnesty International Report 2008 – Pakistan."

15 Nicholas Schmidle, "Farewell, My Jihadi Friend," *Slate*, July 11, 2007, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/07/dispatch-from-islamabad-s-red-mosque.html>.

16 "Troops Deployed Along Karakoram Highway," *Dawn*, April 28, 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/889019/troops-deployed-along-karakoram-highway>.

17 "China: 'Pakistan is Our Israel,'" *Al Jazeera*, October 28, 2010, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2010/10/28/china-pakistan-is-our-israel>.

died during the highway's construction. Nonetheless, the eventual opening in 1979 was marked with a tea ceremony at 15,000 feet in the frozen Khunjerab Pass.

Despite its promises of regional interconnectivity, the Karakoram Highway has very limited commercial activity today. But the highway has played an important cultural role in the Uyghur region historically. As part of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening campaign, Uyghur cultural life was once again tolerated as a means of stimulating the economy, with the *haji* resuming in 1979 after a 15-year suspension under Mao Zedong.<sup>18</sup> Pakistan served as the critical point of transit, with wealthy Uyghurs from Saudi Arabia founding guest houses for pilgrims. Many Uyghurs who lived in the XUAR throughout the 1980s refer to it as a "golden age" in which they could live relatively freely.<sup>19</sup> This period ended in 1990; Beijing reverted to a strict security crackdown in the wake of the Baren incident, in which Han security forces gunned down several Turkic protesters.<sup>20</sup> Officials referred to the events in Baren as a "counter-revolutionary rebellion," claiming 22 died from the violence, including seven members of the security forces. Unofficial sources estimate up to 50 protesters died, with many shot by security forces as they fled the demonstration.<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International called for China to investigate claims of unnecessary lethal force, but no such investigation has ever occurred.<sup>22</sup>

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18 Yitzhak Shichor, "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32 (2005): 122; Waite Edmund "The impact of the State on Islam Amongst the Uyghurs: Religious Knowledge and Authority in the Kashgar Oasis." *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3, (2006): 254–5.

19 Castets Rémi, "The Uyghurs in Xinjiang: The Malaise Grows," *China Perspectives*, September-October, 2003, <https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/648#:~:text=After%20September%2011th%202001%2C%20the,struggle%20against%20Islamic%20terrorist%20networks>.

20 "People's Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region."

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

**FIGURE 17:** Map of the current Karakoram Highway route linking Uyghur cultural center Qāshqār with China’s port project in Gwadar. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



Due to its role as a significant *hajj* transit country, the government of China began to pay more attention to security developments in Pakistan from the mid-1990s onward. While there is no evidence of an official agreement between the two countries to monitor Uyghur activities, it is clear that Islamabad had adopted a conciliatory stance toward its powerful neighbor by 1997.<sup>23</sup> That same year, 14 Uyghur students were reportedly deported from Pakistan—the first instance of this practice I am aware of. Those affected were students at a local *madrassa* but Beijing accused them of “separatism” in the wake of unrest in the northern XUAR of Ghulja, near the Kazakh border.<sup>24</sup> Pakistan, which had been deepening its security arrangements with its northern neighbor, saw such measures as an opportunity to build rapport. The year it deported 14 Uyghur students, Islamabad

23 Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, 88–89.

24 Ranjan Debata Mahesh. “Xinjiang in Central Asia’s Regional Security Structure,” *International Studies* 52, (2015): 53–65.

set out to systematically close Uyghur travel lodges and evict their residents, making it more difficult for them to financially support themselves in Pakistan.<sup>25</sup>

In neighboring Afghanistan, the Taliban's rise to power in 1996 brought additional complications to Chinese regional security ambitions. Starting in 2000, Beijing began to pursue a policy of engagement with the militants, dispatching Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Lu Shulin to meet with the secretive Taliban leader Mullah Omar.<sup>26</sup> During the meeting, Shulin reportedly discussed "rumors that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was allegedly assisting the Muslims in Xinjiang." Mullah Omar dismissed Beijing's concerns, telling the ambassador that "Afghanistan never had any interest in or wished to interfere in China's domestic issues, nor would Afghanistan allow any group to use its territory to conduct any such operation or support to that end." As a gesture of goodwill, the Taliban is believed to have deported 13 Uyghurs who had been residing in Afghanistan under political asylum to China.<sup>27</sup>

But the Taliban did have a history of interaction with an obscure group of Uyghur guerillas who fled to Afghanistan to build a "liberation army." The community, which is still erroneously called ETIM, was founded by Hasan Makhsum, a Uyghur religious scholar who spent time in a Chinese prison under suspicion of "separatist activities." He fled China in 1997 and scrambled together a small community he named the ETIP, a name given as a tribute to the organization led by Zäydin Yüsüp, which had played a role in the 1990 events in Baren.<sup>28</sup> There is no credible connection between these groups other than inspiration, with Makhsum having been a student in Khargilik at the time of the uprising according to Sean Roberts, an expert on the group.<sup>29</sup>

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25 "China: Human rights Concerns in Xinjiang," Human Rights Watch, October 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/background/asia/china-bck1017.htm>.

26 Zaif Abd al-Salam "My Life With the Taliban," New York: *Columbia University Press*, 2010, pp. 135.

27 Shichor, "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," 158.

28 Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Wang Pengxin, "Uighur Separatism: East Turkestan Groups," in *Ethnic Identity and National Conflict in China*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 47–88, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9780230107878\\_4#citeas](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9780230107878_4#citeas).

29 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 102.

In a 2004 *Wall Street Journal* interview with Makhsum's alleged second-in-command Abdullah Qarahaji, it was argued that the group had been denied entry to Afghanistan during their initial attempt to set up a community there in 1997.<sup>30</sup> They would only attain permission to establish a camp in Jalalabad the following year with the support of Jalaluddin Haqqani, a Taliban power-broker with connections to Pakistan's ISI and Al-Qaeda.<sup>31</sup> Haqqani had also founded the "Haqqani Network," a guerilla movement once backed by the CIA to fight the Soviets in the 1980s, which later became a key military wing of the Taliban in 1995.<sup>32</sup> The Taliban recently appointed the Haqqani Network to head Afghanistan's internal security following the fall of Kabul in August 2021. Beyond facilitating ETIP/ETIM's 1998 initial entry into Afghanistan, there is little evidence that the Taliban ever offered further support to Makhsum's fledgling movement.<sup>33</sup>

The band of Uyghurs that retroactively became known to the world as "ETIM" was less a cohesive organization than a small, poorly-resourced community.<sup>34</sup> Senior leadership have even denied having ever carried out a successful attack on China.<sup>35</sup> There is little reason to dispute this testimony given what we know about the group's failed efforts to garner international support. It has been reported that during a 1999 meeting with Osama bin Laden in Kandahar, the group received little interest in the Uyghur cause from Arab militants, let alone funding or support.<sup>36</sup> As interviews with Pakistan media that same year show, bin Laden went so far as to view China as a potential ally in Al-Qaeda's conflict with the United States:

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30 Omer Kanat, David Cloud, and Ian Johnson, "In Post 9/11 World, Chinese Dissidents Pose US Dilemma," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 3, 2004, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109149176842581209>.

31 Kanat, Cloud, and Johnson, "In Post 9/11 World, Chinese Dissidents Pose US Dilemma."

32 Sune Engel Rasmussen and Nancy Youssef, "In Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda Linked Haqqani Network Rise to Power," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan-al-qaeda-linked-haqqani-network-rises-to-power-11629990056>

33 "Uyghur Separatist Denies Links to Taliban, Al-Qaeda," *Radio Free Asia*, January 27, 2002, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/politics/85871-20020127.html>

34 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 110–116.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

I often hear about Chinese Muslims, but since we have no direct connections with people in China and no member of our organization comes from China, I don't have any detailed knowledge about them. The Chinese government is not fully aware of the intentions of the United States and Israel. These two countries also want to usurp the resources of China... so I suggest the Chinese government be more careful of the U.S. and the West.<sup>37</sup>

ETIP/ETIM's relationship with the Taliban was even more fraught, and there is clear evidence that the Taliban stayed true to its promise to China to keep Uyghurs in check. According to UHRP director Omer Kanat, who covered the U.S. war in Afghanistan throughout 2001 as a reporter at *RFA*, the Taliban kept ETIP/ETIM under lockdown in Kabul. According to Kanat, the Taliban transferred Makhsum and his supporters from their villages to the Afghan capital in 1999 and their top leadership was given accommodation so they could be easily monitored. The Taliban allegedly sent the rest of Makhsum's community to military bases outside Kabul.<sup>38</sup> This status quo held until the U.S.-invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 according to Sean Roberts, who interviewed Kanat about a conversation he had at the time with the Taliban's then Deputy Minister of the Interior Mullah Abdul Samad Khaksar, who confirmed this information.<sup>39</sup> Much like their dealings with China today, the Taliban most likely kept the Uyghurs under watch rather than deport the entire community in order to maintain leverage in their negotiations.

One puzzle is the continued existence of a Uyghur village of 30 people near Jalalabad, home to the Uyghurs that came to be known as the Guantánamo 22 (see prelude). It is unclear whether the Taliban had ever been made aware of its existence. My interview with an Uyghur who resided there suggest that whatever community existed at the time was even smaller and more isolated than Makhsum's original villages in 1998.<sup>40</sup> The primary organizer of the Uyghur village that was eventually bombed by U.S. forces in December 2001 was a Uyghur named Abdul Haq, who

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37 Pantucci, "Uyghur Terrorism in a Fractured Middle East."

38 "Arkin Mahmud ISN103," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2005, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/76023-isn-103-arkin-mahmud-administrative-review-board/8ab2af9b5a1965d4/full.pdf>.

39 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 109.

40 Abu Bakker Qassim, interview.

founded the TIP—a loosely connected ETIP splinter group, in 2004. As Makhsum acknowledged in a 2002 interview with *RFA*, the remnants of his community in Kabul likely ended up in the Taliban army while those in the Jalalabad community were swept into Guantánamo Bay. Makhsum would take whatever remnants remained and flee with them to Pakistan.<sup>41</sup>

The group's journey to Pakistan's Waziristan region, home to the Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda, remains unexplained. But Omer Kanat, who conducted Makhsum's final interview, in which the Uyghur militant condemned the September 11, 2001 attacks, has suggested ETIP/ETIM remained at odds with the broader aims of both of these groups.<sup>42</sup>

**FIGURE 18:** Waziristan, a region on Pakistan's Afghan border. The territory is infamously the base of operations for Al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, and the Turkestan Islamic Party. Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



41 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 110.

42 Ibid., 110–116.

South Asia grew more hostile toward Uyghurs with the onset of the GWOT. It was in this context that China's Party-state would begin accusing human rights activists in neighboring countries of "terrorism."

## AUTOCRACY BEYOND BORDERS: CHINA AND THE WAR ON TERROR

After the United States launched its 2001 GWOT, the government of China saw an opportunity to capitalize on the heightened security environment to target Uyghur political activists—whom it could now accuse of "terrorism." Washington also manipulated this environment with its "Axis of Evil" rhetoric to pursue regime change in Iraq. To win China's support for its planned invasion of that country, the U.S. agreed to work with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the PRC to jointly petition the UN to place Makhsum's ETIM on its "terrorist list" under UN Security Council Resolutions 1267 and 1390.<sup>43</sup> The U.S. followed suit and in September that year, recognized ETIM as an international terrorist organization.<sup>44</sup> These designations resulted in immediate controversy. Human rights activists argued that these designations effectively granted China's government carte blanche to persecute Uyghurs around the world. The United States eventually corrected this error in 2020 when the Department of State removed ETIM from its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Terrorist Exclusion List.<sup>45</sup>

In the GWOT, international lists emerged to provide a veneer of legitimacy and professional impartiality to the politically charged world of designating groups as terrorists. The gold standard among these is the "Consolidated List" under the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The list predates the

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43 "Designation of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement Under UNSC Resolutions 1267 and 1390," U.S. Department of State Archive, September 11, 2002, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/13403.htm>.

44 "US Removes Group Condemned by China From 'Terror' List," *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/7/us-removes-group-condemned-by-china-from-terror-list>.

45 "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, November 7, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>; "Terrorist Exclusion List," Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, November 7, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-exclusion-list/>.

GWOT, having emerged in 1999 under Resolution 1267 to punish Al-Qaeda for its 1998 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tanzania, but was granted substantially more influence in the post-9/11 era.<sup>46</sup> Rather than using criteria as-association according to either motivation or acts, the Consolidated List centers on connections to either Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or more recently, IS. As we have seen, ETIP/ETIM failed to meet the basic criteria of a global terror organization, having had no support from the Taliban or Al-Qaeda or any history of having orchestrated attacks.

However, the damage has already been done. In the two decades since 9/11, the combined UNSC and U.S. designation of ETIM as a global terrorist organization gave Beijing a license to target Uyghur groups and individuals by accusing them of affiliating with the organization. The Ministry of State Security's first "terrorist" list, issued in December 2003, included two Uyghur advocacy groups in Germany and their leadership, intimating that they were allied with ETIM.<sup>47</sup> Both in the Uyghur region and around the world, China's government would use accusations of cooperation with ETIM to silence civil society.

Immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks, CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin sent a special envoy to Pakistan to discuss new security measures with President Musharraf. At the request of China's government, Musharraf flew to Xi'an in December 2001 to host a meeting with Muslim leaders in the Grand Mosque, urging them to be patriotic. "Islam is a religion of peace and we don't believe in any violence, and therefore you, being a part of China, have to be very patriotic. All Muslims in China should work for the good of China," he said.<sup>48</sup> Musharraf also asserted in Chinese Party-media that "Pakistan will make full efforts to support China in its fight against East Turkistan terrorist forces."<sup>49</sup> This was the first time that a Pakistani leader publicly supported Beijing's policies in the XUAR.<sup>50</sup>

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46 "1998 US Embassies in Africa Bombings Fast Facts," *CCN*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/06/world/africa/africa-embassy-bombings-fast-facts/index.html>.

47 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 81.

48 "CE Urges Chinese Muslims to be Patriotic," *Dawn*, December 23, 2001, <https://www.dawn.com/news/11727/ce-urges-chinese-muslims-to-be-patriotic>.

49 "CE Urges Chinese Muslims to be Patriotic."

50 "Pakistan: Further Information on Fear of Forcible Return/Fear of Safety. Fear of Torture/ Ill-Treatment. ASA 33/013/2002."

China's weaponization of GWOT rhetoric became more pronounced in 2003 when Beijing targeted Ismail Semed (alias Ismail Abdusemed Haji), a long-time Uyghur activist in Pakistan. Semed had left the Uyghur region for Rawalpindi after the Ghulja riots. In February 2002, Pakistani police detained Semed and Abdulkhakim (no family name given). Reports place plainclothes police officers at his detention.<sup>51</sup> He was deported by Pakistan's authorities to China in 2003 and executed in February 2007 after XUAR officials charged him with possession of firearms and "attempting to divide the motherland."<sup>52</sup> He was also accused of being a founding member of ETIM, despite having no connections to Makhsun's community. According to a review of Semed's sentencing documents, assessed by UHRP at the time of his trial in 2005, the evidence for the Chinese government's charges against him was based on the old testimony of Uyghurs in the XUAR who had never been to Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> China's government executed two of the witnesses in 1999. UHRP believes the testimonies were obtained from these witnesses under threat of torture and death.<sup>54</sup>

Pakistani police took Elham Tohtam from his home and reportedly led him blindfolded to an unknown destination in Pakistan.<sup>55</sup> Tohtam had approached the UNHCR in Islamabad and the Australian government for asylum. In 2002, seven other Uyghurs were detained in Pakistan, including Ablitip Abdul Kadir, Enver Tohti (alias Enver Davut), Golamjan Yasin, Ablikim Turahun, Tilivaldi, Ezizhan, and Zair (no family names given).<sup>56</sup>

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51 "Pakistan: Further information on Fear of forcible return/Fear of Safety. Fear of Torture/ Ill-Treatment. ASA 33/013/2002," Amnesty International, 2002, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA33/013/2002/en/>; *Seeking a Place to Breathe Freely: Current Challenges Faced by Uyghur Refugee and Asylum Seekers*, (Munich: World Uyghur Congress, June 2017), [https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2017/06/WUC-Refugee-Report-Updated-June-2017.pdf](https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2017/06/WUC-Refugee-Report-Updated-June-2017.pdf).

52 "China: Account for Uyghur Refugees Forcibly Repatriated to China," Human Rights Watch, January 28, 2010, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b6abe8d1e.html>.

53 "China: Account for Uyghur Refugees Forcibly Repatriated to China."

54 Ibid.

55 "Pakistan: Further Information on Fear of Forcible Return/Fear of Safety. Fear of Torture/ Ill-Treatment. ASA 33/013/2002."

56 "People's Republic of China: Uighurs Fleeing Persecution as China Wages Its 'War on Terror,'" Amnesty International, 2004, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/92000/asa170212004en.pdf>; see the full, interactive dataset: "China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs," Uyghur Human Rights Project, and Oxus Society

In July 2003, Muhammed Tohti Metrozi received a call from an individual claiming to work for the ISI.<sup>57</sup> Unconfirmed reports from that time allege that Metrozi was deported to China three days after meeting the officer. The following month, XUAR security services detained Metrozi in Ürümchi. UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Manfred Nowak met Metrozi in prison in 2005 as part of an inspection of the region, according to the Xinjiang Victims Database. After seeing Metrozi's appalling condition, and clear evidence that he had been tortured in the Ürümchi prison, Nowak sought assurance that Metrozi would suffer no more torture.<sup>58</sup> Soon after Nowak's departure, however, Metrozi was beaten and tortured in prison to the point of not being able to move for months. This was his punishment for communicating with the UN Special Rapporteur.<sup>59</sup>

In 2005, China and Pakistan ratified the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighborly Relations," which stipulated that neither party would allow the establishment of "any organizations or institutions" that could threaten the "sovereignty; security, and territorial integrity of the other."<sup>60</sup> Despite Islamabad's commitment to eradicating Uyghur militancy within its borders, a new Uyghur organization emerged in 2006 calling itself the Turkestan Islamic Party.<sup>61</sup> The group achieved notoriety in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics after releasing a series of videos threatening the Games. The group appeared to be the project of a Uyghur named Abdul Haq, who had been affiliated with the obscure Uyghur village

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for Central Asian Affairs, <https://oxussociety.org/viz/transnational-repression/>.

57 "[People's Republic of China: Uyghurs fleeing persecution while China declares a war on terrorism] Китайская Народная Республика: Уйгуры спасаются от преследования, в то время как Китай объявляет войну терроризму," Amnesty International, January 17, 2004, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/92000/asa170212004ru.pdf>.

58 "Muhemmedtohti Metrozi," Xinjiang Victims Database, April 27, 2019, <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=3873>.

59 Ibid.

60 "China, Pakistan Sign a Historic Document," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, April 6, 2005, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/xw/t190407.htm>.

61 Haiyun Ma and I-wen Jennifer Chang "For Them, Afghanistan is Safer Than China," *Foreign Policy*, November 1, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/01/for-them-afghanistan-is-safer-than-china/>.

formed in Jalalabad in 2001. He later adopted the Islamic title of “Emir,” usually referring to a military commander.

In 2007, China's MSS released a second “terrorist list” of 20 names.<sup>62</sup> This list included Osman Alihan, a Uyghur businessman who was extradited from Pakistan immediately after his name was made known to Pakistani intelligence.<sup>63</sup> Alihan had been the key organizer of peaceful protests outside the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Islamabad in 2006 after Riyadh denied visas to 6,000 Uyghurs who had planned to go on *hajj*, due to pressure from China.<sup>64</sup> The Uyghurs were left stranded in Pakistan, a major *hajj* transit country. Pakistani police reportedly forced Uyghur protesters to return to their guest houses in Rawalpindi and blocked roads to prevent other Uyghurs from traveling to protest sites.<sup>65</sup> The standstill came to a peaceful conclusion after the Saudi government agreed to issue the visas following international pressure.<sup>66</sup>

In the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the TIP began publishing an Arabic-language magazine through a press associated with Al-Qaeda. The group also began publishing a series of dramatic videos threatening the Games with violence.<sup>67</sup> Experts remained skeptical that the TIP ever possessed capacity around this time to undertake an organized attack on Chinese territory.<sup>68</sup> Pakistan, which had already been coordinating closely with China on security for the Games, made an

62 “Fear of Torture or Ill-Treatment/Incommunicado Detention,” Amnesty International, August 1, 2007, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/64000/asa170252007en.pdf>.

63 Wajid Ali Wajid, “China Worried About Rising Extremism,” *Gulf News*, June 25, 2007, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/china-worried-about-rising-extremism-1.185775>.

64 Refugee Review Tribunal: CHN31261, Australian Refugee Review Tribunal, (February 9, 2007) (CRS-RRT response), [https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b6fe16f0.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3J4WR0B\\_cMbWXehofWAQuKcbzV7v0TiCVQu9UnWpX4gTu2r0v-4mKH30](https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b6fe16f0.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3J4WR0B_cMbWXehofWAQuKcbzV7v0TiCVQu9UnWpX4gTu2r0v-4mKH30).

65 “East Turkestan: Pilgrims Denied Saudi Visas in Pakistan,” Unrepresented People and Nations Organization, September 21, 2006, <https://unpo.org/article/5486>.

66 “Sacred Right Defiled: China's Iron-Fisted Repression of Uyghur Religious Freedom,” Uyghur Human Rights Project, March 8, 2013, <https://docs.uhrp.org/Sacred-Right-Defiled-Chinas-Iron-Fisted-Repression-of-Uyghur-Religious-Freedom.pdf>.

67 Jacob Zenn, “Jihad in China? Marketing the Turkistan Islamic Party,” *Terrorism Monitor* 9, no. 11, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, March 17, 2011), <https://jamestown.org/program/jihad-in-china-marketing-the-turkistan-islamic-party/>.

68 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 105.

additional public show of assistance in countering the group. In response to the TIP's dubious claim to have orchestrated an attack in the XUAR, Pakistani President Musharraf flew to Ürümchi to show support for Beijing's new security policies. After China's government launched a series of police raids across the Uyghur region in 2008, some 1,300 Uyghurs were arrested for "state security crimes," including charges of terrorism—significantly more than in years prior and all without substantive evidence.<sup>69</sup>

Beginning on July 5, 2009, Ürümchi was wracked by three days of inter-ethnic violence. Over the course of the conflict, which began when Chinese security services deployed force against peaceful protesters demanding justice for Uyghur factory workers who had been beaten to death in the factory where they worked in eastern China, groups of Han and Uyghur youth confronted each other with knives and makeshift weapons, resulting in hundreds of casualties.

The aftermath was equally severe. Local police created an internet blackout, cut phone lines, and shut down text messaging services in the XUAR.<sup>70</sup> At the time, human rights organizations estimated that at least 43 Uyghurs had been forcibly disappeared by the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau—many of whom have never been seen or heard from since. The CCP created the perception that the "7/5" Ürümchi events were a turning point for China's XUAR policy and required an abrupt shift in regional security strategies.<sup>71</sup> Rather than a "pre-meditated and organized" terrorist attack coordinated by hostile external forces as state-run media claimed, the bloodshed in Ürümchi that summer was rooted in local grievances over economic marginalization, discrimination, and police brutality.<sup>72</sup> One of the most significant outcomes of the 2009 unrest was the large migration

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69 Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs."

70 "We are Afraid to Even Look for them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang's Protests," Human Rights Watch, October 20, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/10/20/we-are-afraid-even-look-them/enforced-disappearances-wake-xinjiangs-protests>.

71 "Justice, Justice: The July 2009 Protests in Xinjiang, China," Amnesty International, 2010, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/360000/asa170272010en.pdf>.

72 "Urumqi Riots Three Years On - Crackdown on Uighurs Grows Bolder," Amnesty International, July 4, 2012, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2012/07/urumqi-riots-three-years-crackdown-uighurs-grows-bolder/>.

of Uyghur refugees from the XUAR to Turkey, often via dangerous routes through Southeast Asia.<sup>73</sup>

Throughout the crackdown in Ürümchi, Pakistan staunchly supported its ally.<sup>74</sup> Islamabad pulled strings throughout the Islamic world to prevent countries from discussing China's crackdown in the XUAR at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which "saved Beijing from embarrassment," according to the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Luo Zhaohui.<sup>75</sup> At China's behest, Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia successfully canceled a scheduled debate on the Uyghur region at the 2009 OIC meeting, killing any potential declaration on the subject.<sup>76</sup> China eventually allowed the OIC's Secretary-General to go to the Uyghur region—but only after initially blocking his visit; an official OIC visit to the region did not occur for another 10 years.<sup>77</sup>

Uyghurs continued to be swept up in complex politics of Sino-Pakistani relations from 2008 to 2014. In April 2009, CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao made an unusual appeal to then-Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari. Hu Jintao expressed concerns that ETIM's presence in Pakistan might threaten the estimated 5,000 Chinese nationals working on development projects in Pakistan.<sup>78</sup> Hu's claim is striking as no attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan have ever been attributed to ETIM; most have been attributed to unrelated Balochistan separatist groups. Several weeks after Hu's visit, Pakistan's Interior Minister revealed that his government had detained and deported 10 Uyghurs from Pakistan's north-

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73 Alessandro Ripa, "From Uyghurs to Kashgaris (and Back?): Migration and Cross-border Interactions Between Xinjiang and Pakistan," *Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series 23* (2014): 7–10.

74 "Pakistani President Praises China for Handling the Xinjiang Situation with Wisdom," *CCTV*, July 23, 2009, <http://english.cctv.com/20090723/100911.shtml>.

75 "Pakistan Saved China from Embarrassment on Xinjiang Violence," *Daily Times*, September 5, 2009, <https://lubpak.net/archives/1397>.

76 "Xinjiang: China Reportedly Defeated OIC Statement on Uyghurs, Seeking Observership, From the Beijing Embassy to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Wikileaks, July 31, 2009, [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING2185\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING2185_a.html).

77 "US Muslim Groups Accuse OIC of Abetting China's Uighur 'Genocide,'" *Al Jazeera*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/18/us-muslims-press-organization-of-islamic-cooperation-on-china>.

78 "10 Terror Suspects Extradited to China," *The News*, June 6, 2009, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/664892-10-terror-suspects-extradited-to-china>.

west areas to China.<sup>79</sup> Pakistani security forces claimed the men seemed to belong to ETIM/TIP. But the TIP later released a video denying that the 10 Uyghurs in question had any connection to them.<sup>80</sup> Freedom House condemned the extradition, calling it “a disturbing sign of China’s growing influence in the region,” in a statement quoted by *RFA*, “[this event] illustrates how vulnerable Uyghurs are to persecution both inside and outside China.”<sup>81</sup>

Political pressure on Uyghur civil society in Pakistan increased in the wake of the violence in Ürümchi. Activist Umer Khan founded a Uyghur language school in Rawalpindi several months before the 2009 bloodshed in Ürümchi. Soon after the unrest, Pakistani and Chinese Embassy officials began visiting Khan’s school, asking about its curriculum. In 2010, a group of Pakistani men destroyed the school, allegedly on the orders of the ISI. The government of Pakistan put Khan and his brother on Pakistan’s Exit Control List, which prevented them from leaving the country (their names were removed from the list in 2014 after a lengthy court battle). Further, both Khan and his brother reportedly had their bank accounts frozen.<sup>82</sup> These harsh measures were likely due to an accusation by the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad that Khan was an affiliate of Rebiya Kadeer, an exiled Uyghur activist, then-president of the World Uyghur Congress, and organizer of the Ürümchi events, according to the Chinese government.<sup>83</sup> A year after the authorities forced Khan to close his school, a new school called the Peak Montessori and High School opened in the same neighborhood with funding from a Chinese expatriate organization known as the Ex-Chinese Association. The school started with pre-school and primary classes and eventually expanded to include high school classes as well, and includes standard subjects such as social studies and mathematics while

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79 “Pakistan Hands Over Nine Uyghur Militants to China,” *The Indian Express*, April 27, 2009, <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/print/pakistan-hands-over-nine-uyghur-militants-to-china/>.

80 Shohret Hoshur, “Uyghur Group Denies Links,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 7, 2009, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pakistani-05072009124317.html>.

81 Hoshur, “Uyghur Group Denies Links.”

82 Ibid.

83 Hoshur, “Uyghur Group Deny Links.”

emphasizing its Mandarin classes.<sup>84</sup> The Chinese ambassador to Pakistan paid a visit to the building to donate sixteen computers and several books to the library. Khan and his immediate family, including his elderly mother and father, have frequently been detained and had their homes searched over the past decade.<sup>85</sup>

In October 2009, Khan's accountant Kamirdin Abdurahman crossed the border into China en route to Ürümchi to meet with relatives when he was reportedly arrested, stripped, and beaten.<sup>86</sup> Chinese police threatened to continue the abuse unless he agreed to spy on Pakistan's Uyghur community on their behalf, including Umer Khan.<sup>87</sup> He agreed to spy. Upon his release, however, Abdurahman shared his story with international media. He began to receive harassing phone calls from Pakistani and Chinese state officials.<sup>88</sup> Within a month, fearing for his life, Abdurahman fled Pakistan for Afghanistan, where he has been living in exile for the past 11 years. Chinese and Pakistani officials continued to call him, demanding that he surrender the UNHCR status as a refugee he received in Afghanistan.<sup>89</sup> Around the same time, in April 2009, the U.S. Treasury placed TIP leader Abdul Haq on its sanctions list for having links to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This was Washington's first action against a Uyghur since 2002 listing of ETIM as a global terrorist organization. The following February the U.S. went further by targeting Abdul Haq in a drone strike that was reported to have killed him.<sup>90</sup>

The TIP would continue to receive international attention. In late August 2011, the TIP released a video of its members in a training camp

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84 "About" and "Curriculum," Peak Montessori and High School, <https://peak.edu.pk/learning/elementary-school/>.

85 Shohret Hoshur "Pakistani Uyghurs in Hiding," *Radio Free Asia*, April 6, 2010, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pakistan-uyghur-04062010143250.html>

86 "Curriculum."

87 Zuha Siddiqui, "China Is Trying To Spy On Pakistan's Uighurs," *Buzzfeed News*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/zuhasiddiqui/china-pakistan-uyghur-surveillance-ex-chinese-association>

88 Siddiqui, "China Is Trying To Spy On Pakistan's Uighurs."

89 "Uyghur Pressed to Spy," *Radio Free Asia*, December 2, 2009, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/spy-for-china-12022009093045.html>.

90 "Militant Leader Killed in North Waziristan Drone Strike," *Dawn*, March 1, 2010, <https://www.dawn.com/news/963902/militant-leader-killed-in-n-waziristan-drone-strike>.

in Pakistan.<sup>91</sup> This video was the first proof of a Uyghur militant group in Pakistan having a connection to an attack inside China: the video showed a man named Memtieli Tiliwaldi, who had been killed by XUAR police a few days after a series of attacks in Qāshqār and Hotan in late July 2011.<sup>92</sup> Beijing claimed the terrorists responsible for the attack had trained in Pakistan before returning to the XUAR to carry out the attack.<sup>93</sup> This detailed allegation implicating a long-term ally was groundbreaking. China's government had rarely before criticized its strategic partner in such explicit terms.<sup>94</sup> When reached for comment about the allegation, a senior Pakistani official stated that Pakistan had already handed over numerous militant leaders to Chinese authorities and had always cooperated with China against ETIM and TIP.<sup>95</sup>

Nine days after China's government leveled these criticisms at its partner, Pakistan's ISS arrested five more Uyghurs—with no connection to international terror organizations—and deported them to China.<sup>96</sup> This group had been arrested in Balochistan in 2010 as part of a larger group attempting to emigrate to Turkey.<sup>97</sup> According to Umer Khan, a 33-year-old trader named Omer Muhter had been a part of this group before he disappeared in detention in Islamabad and was deported to China in 2011. Reports from the time claimed that another five members of that same group, including Menzire Memet (alias Manzokra Mamad) and her two children, were brought to an airport in Islamabad where they were placed on a South China Airlines flight CZ6008 and deported to Ürümchi.<sup>98</sup>

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91 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 124.

92 Jacob Zenn, "Catch-22 of Xinjiang as a Gateway," *Asia Times*, September 22, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110925021228/http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/MI22Ad02.html>.

93 Jason Dean and Jeremy Page, "Beijing Points to Pakistan After Ethnic Violence," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1000142405311903341404576481312937363114>.

94 Dean and Page, "Beijing Points to Pakistan After Ethnic Violence."

95 Dean and Page, "Beijing Points to Pakistan After Ethnic Violence."

96 Shohret Hoshur, "Pakistan Deports Uyghurs," *Radio Free Asia*, August 10, 2011, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pakistan-08102011175506.html/>.

97 Hoshur, "Pakistan Deports Uyghurs."

98 Ibid.

An anonymous source who spoke to Pakistani news outlet *Dawn* said a “Chinese national,” Abdushukhur Ablimit, was supposed to go with “his compatriots.” Abdushukhur was “blindfolded and handcuffed like the other five, (and) had been allotted a seat on the flight,” according to reports.<sup>99</sup> However, he was ejected after the pilot refused his entry on the plane for “unspecified reasons.”<sup>100</sup> His whereabouts are unknown.

While Pakistani security services targeted Uyghur civilians at this time, the U.S. led several drone strikes against TIP leadership. In 2012, U.S. air-strikes took out three of TIP’s senior leaders, including Abdushukur who had become Emir after Abdul Haq was killed by a U.S. drone in 2010. This would significantly alter the group’s composition. Furthermore, the TIP’s ranks swelled over this period as China’s security crackdown in response to the 2009 events in Ürümchi caused 30,000 Uyghur refugees to flee China between 2010 and 2014. While the overwhelming majority of refugees would peacefully migrate to Turkey and South Asia, a significant number would join TIP in Waziristan.<sup>101</sup>

In 2012, China’s government deepened its relations with the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. That June, Afghanistan was formally introduced to the SCO as an observer. In September, China dispatched Security Chief Zhou Yongkang to Afghanistan as the first Politburo-level visitor in 40 years.<sup>102</sup> The meetings between China and the Taliban largely focused on China’s concerns that Taliban-occupied regions could become strongholds for Uyghur separatists to target China.<sup>103</sup> The discussions would also grant Beijing strategic leverage over the militants, with one former CCP official later claiming that other than Pakistan, China is the only other country to have maintained a “continuous relationship with the very top leadership of the Taliban.”<sup>104</sup>

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99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 124.

102 “Afghan Taliban Delegation Visits China to Discuss Unrest: Sources,” *Reuters*, July 30, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-china/afghan-taliban-delegation-visits-china-to-discuss-unrest-sources-idUSKCN10A09H>.

103 “Afghan Taliban Delegation Visits China to Discuss Unrest: Sources.”

104 Ibid.

## “ABSOLUTELY NO MERCY”: CHINA’S GLOBAL CAMPAIGN TO SUPPRESS THE UYGHURS

In 2014 leaders of both Al-Qaeda and IS had singled out China for its oppression of Muslims. In a speech given in that same year in the XUAR, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping ordered local authorities to show “absolutely no mercy” in the “struggle against terrorism, infiltration, and separatism.”<sup>105</sup> By November, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan Jamaat-ul Ahrar—a branch of the Pakistani Taliban—printed an article in its official magazine that said, “We’re warning Beijing to stop killing Uyghurs. If you don’t change your anti-Muslim policies, soon the mujahideen will target you.”<sup>106</sup>

Despite fears of an international terrorist threat, there is little evidence to suggest Uyghur militants have proven successful in attracting disparate groups to their cause and no such group has ever claimed to have carried out an attack on Chinese nationals. Nevertheless, the CCP launched its “People’s War on Terror” and “Strike Hard Against Violent Extremism” campaigns in 2014. Far beyond counterterrorism, these campaigns have decimated Uyghur culture, destroying mosques and cemeteries, community life, language, faith, and familial relations, has resulted in extrajudicial mass internment, political indoctrination, forced renunciation of faith, torture, forced labor camps, mass incarceration, and the construction of a repressive surveillance state.<sup>107</sup>

With the onset of China’s campaigns, foreign ties have become an increasingly dangerous risk for Uyghurs. In the XUAR, police officers—whose ranks swelled rapidly over this period following a mass recruitment drive in 2016—help feed data into a powerful database known as the IJOP (see introduction).<sup>108</sup> Through the IJOP, billions of data points collected by “convenience police stations” and the millions of surveillance cameras

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105 Ramzy and Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims.”

106 Jardine and Evans, *Nets Cast from the Earth to the Sky: China’s Hunt for Pakistan’s Uyghurs*.

107 Chris Buckley, “China Is Erasing Mosques and Precious Shrines in Xinjiang,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/25/world/asia/xinjiang-china-religious-site.html>.

108 “China’s Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App.”

placed all over the Uyghur region are fed into an algorithm that evaluates a person's "exposure to extremist influences," and sorts citizens into groups deemed "trustworthy" or "suspicious."<sup>109</sup> Those in the former category can go about their business relatively unhindered, albeit under an Orwellian surveillance system. Those deemed "suspicious" are subject to detention, interrogation, imprisonment, and extensive political re-education. The IJOP also categorizes people as "suspicious" for contact with 26 blacklisted countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>110</sup> As a result, individuals who have traveled to these countries, have family in these countries, or communicate with people there have been detained, interrogated, and convicted and imprisoned—usually on charges of "extremism."<sup>111</sup>

Pakistani Uyghurs in particular have suffered greatly from that country's inclusion on the list of 26 countries the IJOP monitors. Many Pakistani men have Uyghur wives from the XUAR, a legacy of long cross-border cultural and commercial exchange, but with the onset of the 2017 mass internment campaign in the XUAR, many women have been imprisoned just for having Pakistani husbands.<sup>112</sup> A substantial number of Pakistani men traveled to the Chinese capital in January 2020 to advocate for the release of their wives, but with no success.<sup>113</sup> Chinese government spokespeople said they were "not aware" of the situation these families were in and repeated the Party line that the CCP wants "stability and lasting peace" in the Uyghur region.<sup>114</sup> In 2020, China's Ambassador to Pakistan Yao Jing callously undermined the pleas made by separated couples by suggesting that their marriages were probably "forced" and informed them that forced marriage is illegal in China.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to detentions and refolements conducted by the government of Pakistan, Chinese surveillance technology has been gaining a foothold.<sup>116</sup>

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109 Jardine and Evans, *"Nets Cast from the Earth to the Sky": China's Hunt for Pakistan's Uyghurs*.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Khurram Husain, "Exclusive: CPEC Masterplan Revealed," *Dawn*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1333101>.

A June 2017 article in *Dawn* on leaked documents that outlined China's long-term agenda associated with CPEC and Pakistan, including a plan to implement electronic surveillance systems along the China-Pakistan border, and a plan to install 24-hour video monitoring in most major cities in Pakistan. The leaked materials also show how the Chinese government aims to use broadcast media in Pakistan to better disseminate Chinese cultural content.<sup>117</sup> With Chinese officials already requesting that Pakistani media verify any negative coverage of China with its Embassy in Islamabad, this plan will likely serve to streamline this process.

Alongside digital repression, China's government has been strengthening its on-the-ground intelligence gathering. In 2017, the Chinese Embassy linked Ex-Chinese Association began visiting Uyghur homes in Rawalpindi and handed out "registration forms."<sup>118</sup> The forms were reportedly produced to help Uyghur children study Mandarin in Chinese Embassy-connected schools in Pakistan. "Many of the families are living below the poverty line and sign these forms in exchange for bread and rice," Umer Khan, a local Uyghur activist in Rawalpindi, told me. He said that China's government may use the registration forms to monitor the population or deport them to the Uyghur region.<sup>119</sup> He added: "A large number of people signing the list are illiterate and sign using their fingerprints. After they sign, they are no longer viewed as simply Pakistani, but as Chinese subjects." So far, the Ex-Chinese Association may have registered as many as 400 names in Pakistan.

These trends demonstrate the transnational proliferation of Chinese practices in the XUAR: intrusive data-gathering is a standard component of community surveillance and "predictive policing." For example, in 2015, Human Rights Watch reported that Uyghurs were required to submit bio-data along with their passport applications, including "a DNA sample, a voice sample, a 3D image of themselves, and their

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117 Jardine and Evans, *"Nets Cast from the Earth to the Sky": China's Hunt for Pakistan's Uyghurs*.

118 Siddiqui, "China Is Trying To Spy On Pakistan's Uighurs."

119 Muhammad Umer Khan (Uyghur activist), interview by Bradley Jardine and Robert Evans, April 14, 2021, video and audio.

fingerprints.”<sup>120</sup> Such personal data now feeds into massive databases like the IJOP (see introduction).<sup>121</sup>

The Ex-Chinese Association's Facebook page admin regularly posts content defending China's repressive policies in the XUAR.<sup>122</sup> Chinese officials continue to distance themselves from the organization, in spite of the organization having a documented history of receiving funding from the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad.<sup>123</sup> Zhao Lijian, for example, a former DCM at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad and current spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claimed that he was not aware of the organization's existence in a recent report. On June 6, 2019, however, Zhao was photographed with members of the Ex-Chinese Association.<sup>124</sup>

Afghanistan and Pakistan feature prominently in China's perception of national security. This reality has profound implications for Uyghurs living outside China's borders. Israel Ahmet, a Uyghur who fled from the Uyghur region to Afghanistan, lived and worked in Kabul for 10 years. Known as an honest businessman, he had lived frugally. In 2015, he was arrested and deported by Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security.<sup>125</sup> After being flagged as a spy, he was rushed to the Kabul International Airport, where PRC officials were waiting. He was forced onto a plane and disappeared.

In October 2014, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani met to agree on a deal. Ghani assured Xi that Afghanistan would support China's fight against ETIM/TIP, in exchange for a pledge of hundreds of millions of USD in assistance, technical training, and scholarships for Afghan students to study in China.<sup>126</sup> In June 2021, the UNSC estimated that 200 ETIM/TIP fighters were in Afghanistan's

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120 “China: Account for Uyghur Refugees Forcibly Repatriated to China,” Human Rights Watch, January 28, 2010, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b6abe8d1e.html>.

121 “China's Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App.”

122 Jardine and Evans, “*Nets Cast from the Earth to the Sky*”: China's Hunt for Pakistan's Uyghurs.

123 Siddiqui, “China Is Trying To Spy On Pakistan's Uighurs.”

124 Ibid.

125 Bethany Matta, “China to Neighbors: Send Us Your Uyghurs,” *Al Jazeera*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/2/18/china-to-neighbours-send-us-your-uighurs>.

126 Matta, “China to Neighbors: Send Us Your Uyghurs.”

Taliban-controlled Kunar province and Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (i.e., the "Tribal Belt").<sup>127</sup> These groups of fighters are small in scale, isolated, and lack the necessary networks, resources, or fighting prowess to warrant such attention from China.<sup>128</sup>

As the security situation in Afghanistan began to worsen, China deepened its role in South Asia. By July 5, 2021, Taliban insurgents had gained control over major checkpoints along two-thirds of Tajikistan's extensive 870-mile border with Afghanistan. As the militants seized territory, waves of refugees poured across the Tajik border, where China has been gaining a foothold in the mountainous republic.<sup>129</sup> In response to the Taliban's rise, China began a charm offensive focussed on infrastructure projects to better link Afghanistan to the BRI, including a motorway between Kabul and Peshawar.<sup>130</sup> These overtures have already borne fruit, with Taliban representatives telling international media that China is a "welcome friend" in Afghanistan.<sup>131</sup> On July 8, 2021, as the Taliban recaptured Afghanistan, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen told reporters that Afghan territory under the group's control would not be used against other countries and that the Taliban would not interfere in China's internal affairs.<sup>132</sup> As in its dealings with Pakistan and the Ghani government, China is engaging with the Taliban in order to stem any potential flows of Uyghur refugees

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127 Ibid.

128 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "A BRI(idg) Too Far: The Unfulfilled Promise and Limitations of China's Involvement in Afghanistan," *Brookings*, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-bridge-too-far-the-unfulfilled-promise-and-limitations-of-chinas-involvement-in-Afghanistan/>.

129 "600 Afghan Soldiers Repatriated After Fleeing to Tajikistan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 7, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-soldiers-repatriated-tajikistan/31345532.html>.

130 Syed Fazl-E-Haider, "China Has a Big Plan for Post-U.S. Afghanistan—and It's Worth Billions," *Daily Beast*, July 4, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/china-has-a-big-plan-for-post-us-afghanistan-and-its-worth-billions>.

131 Ben Farmer and Louise Watt, "Taliban Outlaws Uyghur Fighters in Bid to Befriend China," *The Telegraph*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2021/07/12/taliban-outlaws-uyghur-muslim-fighters-bid-befriend-china/>.

132 Yaroslav Trofimov and Chao Deng, "Afghanistan's Taliban, Now on China's Border, Seeks to Reassure Beijing," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistans-taliban-now-on-chinas-border-seek-to-reassure-beijing-11625750130>.

that might cross into China.<sup>133</sup> By securing a relationship with the Taliban, China's government can tighten its grip on Uyghurs in Afghanistan, and protect its western border. "We care about the oppression of Muslims, be it in Palestine, in Myanmar, or China, and we care about the oppression of non-Muslims anywhere in the world," Shaheen told reporters in Qatar. "But what we are not going to do is interfere in China's internal affairs."<sup>134</sup>

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with nine Afghan Taliban representatives on July 28, 2021.<sup>135</sup> Wang used the occasion to present the Taliban as a legitimate organization, saying "[The Taliban] is a crucial military and political force in Afghanistan that is expected to play an important role in the peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction process of the country."<sup>136</sup> The core of Wang's message was China's long-standing demand for the Taliban to "sever all ties with all terrorist organizations, including ETIM."<sup>137</sup> Since the 1990s, this issue has formed the bedrock of Beijing's engagement with the Taliban. Nevertheless, the Chinese foreign minister told his Afghan visitors that his country's engagement comes with conditions. If they are to cooperate, then the Taliban would have to "build a positive image and pursue an inclusive policy."<sup>138</sup> These policies have severe implications for the region's Uyghurs.

Abdulaziz Naseri, a Uyghur refugee in Turkey, agreed to speak with me about the situation of Uyghurs in Afghanistan. He belongs to a Uyghur family that moved from the XUAR to Kabul in 1976 to escape the "cruelty of the Communist Party and their killing of Muslims."<sup>139</sup> After living

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133 Reid Standish, "Explainer: Why Is China Talking To The Taliban?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 20, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/explainer-china-taliban-afghanistan/31368531.html>.

134 Trofimov and Deng, "Afghanistan's Taliban, Now on China's Border, Seeks to Reassure Beijing."

135 Yun Sun, "A Reluctant Embrace: China's New Relationship With the Taliban," *War on the Rocks*, August 10, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/a-reluctant-embrace-chinas-new-relationship-with-the-taliban/>.

136 Steven Lee Myers, "China Offers the Taliban a Warm Welcome While Urging Peace Talks," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/world/asia/china-taliban-afghanistan.html>.

137 Myers, "China Offers the Taliban a Warm Welcome While Urging Peace Talks."

138 Ibid.

139 Abdulaziz Naseri (Uyghur refugee), interview by Bradley Jardine and Robert Evans, April 15, 2021, audio.

in Kabul for seven years, Abdulaziz and his family fled to Pakistan in 1983 to escape the Soviet Army after several years of suffering abuse at their hands. In June 2019, Abdulaziz visited Turkey, where he told me he attended a meeting by a Uyghur activist organization by the name of the “East Turkestan Brotherhood.” His parents were allegedly detained in Pakistan in retaliation for his attendance. He said he fears going back to Pakistan or he will be arrested and sent to China. He also fears the ill his return may bring on his family. “I am afraid for my parents still living in Pakistan,” he told me.<sup>140</sup>

Since the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and the Taliban’s rapid ascent to power, Uyghurs in Afghanistan have reported a sense of impending danger. Over the course of August 2021, I received a series of voice messages from Abdulaziz, explaining his community’s fear. He told me that when he and his family first arrived in Afghanistan in 1976, the identification materials he was issued listed him as a “Chinese migrant.” Despite his eventual Afghan citizenship, these forms, which remain his primary source of identification, continue to label him a “Chinese migrant.”<sup>141</sup> Under the Taliban, this has dangerous ramifications for Abdulaziz and many other Uyghurs across Afghanistan.

He told me that if China should cut a deal with the Taliban, it would be easy to access the government’s central registry and access these forms. If accessed, Abdulaziz believes that it will be easy to investigate the Uyghur origins of anyone listed “Chinese migrant” since the number of people remains small, at around 3,000. He tells me he personally knows of at least 20 families with similarly marked documents. For countries that have been colluding with China’s government in refoulement of Uyghurs, the documents may also provide grounds for denying visas or detaining Afghan refugees and deporting them to China. Whether Uyghurs choose to live under the Taliban or flee to other countries, the legacy of the “Chinese migrant” ID forms may make them a target for China’s transnational repression.<sup>142</sup>

Over-fixation on Uyghurs is a dangerous policy position for China, which has not learned the lessons of the instability caused by the 2007 Siege

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140 Abdulaziz Naseri, interview.

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid.

of Lal Masjid. Two days after Wang Yi met with the Taliban delegation in Tianjin, the Chinese Foreign Ministry warned Chinese nationals about dangers in the region. In Pakistan, three attacks against Chinese citizens occurred in 2021: the April 22 bombing of a hotel in Quetta where the Chinese ambassador was staying, a bus explosion in Kohistan that killed nine Chinese engineers in mid-July, and the shooting in Karachi of a car carrying Chinese engineers on the same day the Taliban delegation met with Wang.<sup>143</sup> Analysts say the Pakistani Taliban was likely behind each of these attacks.<sup>144</sup> With security in the Uyghur region ramped up and borders heavily fortified, Chinese officials worry that attacks on overseas Chinese infrastructure and nationals may increase. By engaging with the Afghan Taliban, Beijing hopes to mitigate the worst of this trend.

But there is no guarantee that the Taliban can prevent attacks. Even if the group's core leadership were China-friendly, it is unlikely that radical factions and splinter organizations will not take a more aggressive stance. This dynamic puts Chinese interests at risk. Transnational repression and over-fixation on Uyghurs potentially undermine broader Chinese security interests just as they did in 2007 when Pakistan was pushed to the brink of chaos.

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143 Sun, "A Reluctant Embrace: China's New Relationship With the Taliban."

144 Sophia Saifi and Helen Regan "Four Killed in a Car Bombing Outside Pakistan Hotel Where Chinese Ambassador Was Reportedly Staying," *CNN*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/21/asia/pakistan-bomb-blast-chinese-ambassador-intl-hnk/index.html>

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Midnight in Cairo

**“When the mind is active, all kinds of demons come into existence; when the mind is extinguished, all kinds of demons will be extinguished.”**

Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West*

**PEOPLE HAD BEEN** disappearing across the Egyptian capital Cairo for months. Restaurants grew quiet. Apartments were left vacant. Everywhere, hushed voices spoke of neighbors being dragged off into the night. In Nasr City, a populous district and home to a small Uyghur community of several thousand, it felt like a gathering storm. As darkness descended on July 4, 2017, the sound of screaming pierced the air, and a larger crackdown began.

The Egyptian Ministry of Interior had dispatched public security officers to round up anyone who had arrived in the country from the XUAR. It started with the raid on Masjid Musa, a mosque that had served as the place of worship for the Uyghur community.<sup>1</sup> Then they swept through apartments and residential areas in search of individuals on their “terror” lists.<sup>2</sup> As the raids got underway, people took to the streets. The darkness punctured by the light of cell phone screens beaming fearful messages. Some said their children had been taken.

The “security” sweep had been brewing for months. Since April 2017, Egyptian police had been interrogating landlords and real estate agents to gain information on their Uyghur tenants. By July, Egyptian security services had been instructed to patrol the country’s international airports, ready to snare any Uyghurs who attempted to flee. Other agents raided

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1 Sara Gabr (Egyptian Commission on Rights and Freedoms), online video interview by Bradley Jardine and Lucille Greer, June 10, 2021, video and audio.

2 Anonymous Uyghur Student, online voice interview by Bradley Jardine and Lucille Greer, May 6, 2021, audio.

popular Uyghur restaurants in the city. Those absent from police lists were told that they had four days to grab their money and their papers and “get out [of the country].” Detainees, meanwhile, were sent to Cairo’s notorious Tora Prison - known to Egyptian dissidents as “Scorpion Prison.”<sup>3</sup> In darkened interrogation rooms, officers from China’s Ministry of State Security sat in wait.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, China has been building support or implicit endorsement from governments across the Middle East and North Africa for its security crackdown in the Uyghur region and beyond.<sup>5</sup> In 2019, 36 countries signed a letter endorsing China’s mass incarceration program, including major Arab powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE (see Appendix Two).<sup>6</sup> During a meeting in Beijing with CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2019, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman went so far as to remark: “We respect and support China’s right to take counterterrorism and de-extremism measures to safeguard national security.”<sup>7</sup> But Arab states’ backing is not limited to diplomatic support. At least six MENA governments that I am aware of—Egypt, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE—and their security services have taken an active role in China’s campaign of transnational repression. This cooperation against the Uyghur population involves intimidation, detention, and rendition back to China; the latter virtually guarantees immediate custody in an internment camp.

Links to the MENA have proven dangerous for the Uyghurs. Since 2017, the CCP’s PLAC has issued blacklists of 26 primarily Muslim-majority

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3 “We Are in Tombs: Abuses in Egypt’s Scorpion Prison,” Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/28/we-are-tombs/abuses-egypts-scorpion-prison>.

4 “‘They are Not Welcome Here’: Report on the Uyghur Crisis in Egypt,” Freedom of Thought and Expression Law Firm, October 1, 2017, [https://afteegypt.org/en/academic\\_freedoms/2017/10/01/13468-afteegypt.html](https://afteegypt.org/en/academic_freedoms/2017/10/01/13468-afteegypt.html).

5 While no formal, unifying definition of the “Arab world” exists, it is generally understood to be the 22 countries of the Arab League that all speak a dialect of Arabic and have some shared Arab heritage.

6 Michelle Nichols, “Saudi Arabia Defends Letter Backing China’s Xinjiang Policy,” *Reuters*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-rights-saudi/saudi-arabia-defends-letter-backing-chinas-xinjiang-policy-idUSKCN1UD36J>

7 “Chinese President Meets Saudi Crown Prince,” *Xinhuanet*, February 22, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/22/c\\_137843268.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/22/c_137843268.htm).

countries deemed “suspicious.”<sup>8</sup> Eight are in the MENA: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.<sup>9</sup> These lists have resulted in the recall of Uyghur students and business people worldwide, their arrest, imprisonment, and in some cases, death.<sup>10</sup> The disappearances in Cairo were part of this crackdown. Uyghur students who were studying at the prestigious Al-Azhar University had caught the interest of the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau. One of the jewels of the Islamic world, Al-Azhar has stood in Cairo for over a thousand years and has trained hundreds of prominent Uyghur scholars. The Chinese Embassy in Cairo raised its concerns to the Egyptian government in late 2016 after the Egyptian Ministry of Interior approved an additional 600 Uyghurs to study at Al-Azhar the following year, raising the total to 3,000 by the time of the July 2017 raids. Soon after their approval, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted the Egyptian president, accusing Al-Azhar of accepting Chinese students without its approval.<sup>11</sup>

The events that summer show the growing hand of China’s Party-state in the region’s internal affairs. Most of the detained Uyghurs claimed they were forced to sign papers confessing their alleged involvement with Uyghur militants. Those without legal residence authorization were immediately sent to China, while many of those who had residence permits saw them terminated. In the latter cases, some fled to third countries, including the UAE, where Chinese officers would later hunt for them.

## BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: UYGHURS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

China’s first contact with the Middle East occurred in the 8th-century. In the summer of 751, somewhere in the Talas River valley along the border of

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8 “China’s Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App.”

9 “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’: China’s Campaign of Mass Repression in Xinjiang.”

10 “Two Uyghurs Returned From Egypt Dead in Chinese Police Custody,” *Middle East Monitor*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171222-2-uyghur-students-returned-from-egypt-dead-in-china-police-custody/>.

11 Khaled al-Masry “Uighur Muslims in Egypt: A Welcoming Journey Ending with Deportation,” *Daraj*, January 23, 2020, <https://daraj.com/en/49283/>.

what are today Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the armies of the vast empires of the Arab Abbasid Caliphate and Tang China clashed.<sup>12</sup> It was the first and last meeting of Arab and Chinese armies and China was never again to expand this far west.<sup>13</sup> But the two civilizations would continue to engage diplomatically along the Silk Roads, the ancient logistical networks over which they had fought to control. By the time of China's Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Admiral Zheng He, “China's Columbus,” a Hui Muslim explorer who navigated the globe, charted an unexplored course for Mecca.<sup>14</sup> The admiral sent a party to perform *hajj* during his celebrated fourth voyage in 1413 that saw him spread Ming influence to the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>15</sup>

China was a relative newcomer to the MENA region in modern times, however. In 1956, it established its first partnership in the region with the Egyptian government. Egypt was the first Arab nation to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1956, support Beijing's claim to represent China in the UN rather than Taipei, and adopt the “One China” policy.<sup>16</sup> Beijing sent its first-ever foreign grant of \$4.5 million USD to Egypt during the Suez Crisis, a gesture loaded with symbolism.<sup>17</sup>

After China became a net oil importer in 1993, its relations with the broader MENA region began to pick up.<sup>18</sup> China made inquiries to the international oil companies based in the region. At first skeptical about what kind of demand China could bring to their industry, oil executives came to count on the PRC's potential, not actual, demand. The oil trade has since become the backbone of China-MENA relations, bringing FDI

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12 al-Masry, “Uighur Muslims in Egypt: A Welcoming Journey Ending with Deportation.”

13 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 36.

14 Muhammad Olimat, *China and the Middle East: From Silk Road to Arab Spring*, (London: Routledge, 2015). <https://www.routledge.com/China-and-the-Middle-East-From-Silk-Road-to-Arab-Spring/Olimat/pl-book/9781857437966>.

15 Muhammad Olimat, *China and the Middle East: From Silk Road to Arab Spring*.

16 Mordechai Chaziza “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: A New Stage in China-Egypt Relations,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 20, no. 3, (2016): 41–50.

17 Mohamed El Dahshan, *Egyptian Exceptionalism in a Chinese-led World*, (London: Chatham House, February 10, 2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/egyptian-exceptionalism-chinese-led-world>.

18 “China Profile,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, September 30, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN>

and political cooperation along with it.<sup>19</sup> Trade with the region has risen steadily in recent decades, spiking in 2013 with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI was officially added to the PRC's constitution, together with "Xi Jinping Thought" in 2017, emphasizing its importance to the Party-state.<sup>20</sup> The project has developed into a major diplomatic and economic initiative connecting China with over 130 countries and 29 international organizations worldwide.<sup>21</sup> The 22 countries of the Middle East have each signed some form of BRI agreement with China.<sup>22</sup>

As Chinese economic engagement in the MENA has increased, so too has Beijing's interest in the region's Uyghur population. The Uyghur diaspora (known in the MENA as Turkestani) took shape in the 19th and 20th centuries as Uyghurs fled Yaqub Beg's failed emirate and the collapse of the first and second East Turkestan Republics (see chapter one). In Saudi Arabia, refugees from Central Asia (mainly Uzbek), and the neighboring Uyghur region to the east adopted the label "Turkestani," referring to the indigenous name for the region. Central Asia was later divided between the Russian and Qing empires, and then again by their respective successor states the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The formation of the latter in 1949 led to two final waves of refugees to the MENA as Uyghurs fled the chaos of Mao Zedong's collectivization campaign called the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

According to Chinese sources, the Saudi "Overseas Chinese"<sup>23</sup> community is estimated to be around 180,000 today, of whom 90 percent

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19 Bradley Jardine and Lucille Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*, (Washington, DC: Uyghur Human Rights Project and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, forthcoming); Ali al-Naimi, *Out of the Desert: My Journey From Nomadic Bedouin to Heart of Global Oil*, (London: Penguin U.K., 2016).

20 "Xi's Thought to be Codified in the Chinese Constitution," *Xinhuanet*, March 5, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/05/c\\_137017101.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/05/c_137017101.htm).

21 Philipp Galkin, Dongmei Chen, and Junyuang Ke, "China's Energy Investment Through the Lens of the Belt and Road Initiative," King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center, December 2019.

22 Chen Juan, Shu Meng, and Wen Shaobiao, "Aligning China's Belt and Road Initiative with Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision: Opportunities and Challenges," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4, no. 3, (2018): 363–379.

23 James Jiann Hua To, "Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese," *The China Quarterly*, (2014): 199.

are identified as Uyghurs or Turkestanis.<sup>24</sup> These figures are likely inflated, however, judging by past surveys. In 1956, Yulbars Khan, head of Taiwan's Xinjiang Provincial Government in Exile, put their numbers at 8,000. Uyghur sources today, meanwhile, tend to put the figure closer to 50,000.<sup>25</sup> The Uyghur community in Egypt was estimated to be around 8,000 prior to 2017, while numbers for the UAE and its neighboring states lack agreed estimates.

The 1980s saw the diaspora communities reconnecting with their homeland in the XUAR, though it should be emphasized that these connections have always been present.<sup>26</sup> Domestic developments in the PRC played a crucial role in this process. Throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) Islam was harshly suppressed and everyday acts such as prayer, fasting, and even the common Islamic greeting “*assalamu alaikum*” were banned. With the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping steadily rose to prominence and ushered in an era of political and economic reform. In the Uyghur region, religious ceremonies and practices were once again permitted. In 1986, 10 colleges of Islamic education were established throughout China, including in the XUAR capital Ürümqi. The state also began to provide tuition and stipends to students for the first few years to pursue formal training as *imams*. In addition to four-year programs that included the study of Arabic and the Qur'an, these colleges also offered three-month-long refresher courses for religious community leaders. This granted the CCP a great deal of control over the instruction of Islam, with the power of selection for teachers and students. As the government walked back tuition funding for students at domestic Islamic colleges by the end of the decade, scholarships from other countries, including the MENA, became a compelling reason for Uyghur and other Muslim students to pursue

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24 Rian Thum and Huda Abdul Ghafour Amin Kashgary, “The Turkestanis of Mecca: Community Histories of Periphery and Center,” *Asian Ethnicity* 22, no. 1, (2020): 188–207, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14631369.2020.1797473?journalCode=caet20>.

25 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

26 For more on the role of Islamic pilgrimages and transnational oral traditions in the formation of modern Uyghur identity, see Rian Thum “The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History,” *Harvard University Press*, October 13, 2014, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674598553>

Islamic studies abroad.<sup>27</sup> The 1980s also saw an easing of travel restrictions, allowing Uyghurs to study in the MENA and South Asia. As mosques and *madrassas* reopened, Uyghurs took advantage of the policy shift to go on *hajj*, which had been allowed to resume in 1979 after a fifteen-year suspension.<sup>28</sup> Wealthy Uyghurs from Saudi Arabia played a key role in facilitating these travels and established a number of guest houses for pilgrims in Pakistan—a major transit country for Uyghurs on their way to Mecca (see chapter three). Around this period, the idea of a Uyghur national identity made its way to Turkestanis in the MENA, leading many of them to self-identify as Uyghurs rather than Turkestanis for the first time.<sup>29</sup>

In 1988, China's authorities grew suspicious of growing ties between the Uyghur region and the MENA. At the time, Beijing alleged that conservative Islamic doctrines were taking root among the traditionally moderate peoples of the XUAR. These concerns were seemingly confirmed from the CCP's point of view when on April 5, 1990, demonstrations allegedly led by an Islamic nationalist group resulted in violence in the town of Baren, near Qāshqār.<sup>30</sup> When security forces tried to violently disperse Uyghur protestors, fighting broke out. Official sources called the events a “counter-revolutionary rebellion” and claimed 22 were killed, including seven members of local security services. Unofficial sources estimated that up to 50 protestors had been killed.<sup>31</sup> The protests started in response to the one-child policy being implemented in the region but the Xinjiang PSB blamed a conservative doctrine from the Middle East called Wahhabism, which they said had

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27 Jackie Armijo, “Islamic Education in China: Rebuilding Communities and Expanding Local and International Networks,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 15–24.

28 Yitzhak Shichor, “Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang,” 122.; Edmund Waite, “The impact of the State on Islam Amongst the Uyghurs: Religious Knowledge and Authority in the Kashgar Oasis,” *Central Asian Survey* 25, no.3, (2006): 251–265.

29 Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “The Communist Party of China’s United Front Work in the Gulf: The ‘Ethnic Minority Overseas Chinese’ of Saudi Arabia as a Case Study,” *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, March 2018, <https://kfcris.com/pdf/364dd98d47dae1c81e9eb8362a086bf85af3e7e7f302e.pdf>.

30 “People’s Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.”

31 *Ibid.*

been spreading among the Uyghurs living in the south of the XUAR.<sup>32</sup> The Xinjiang PSB believed that Turkestani religious clerics and scholars in the Hejaz of western Saudi Arabia, such as Ma'sum Sultan al-Khujandi, had a great deal of influence on incoming pilgrims and visitors, were spreading the doctrine among Uyghurs on *hajj*.<sup>33</sup> There is little reason to believe this, however, according to XUAR historians. Wahhabism has never been well-received in the Uyghur region and the CCP's fixation on the doctrine has been driven by exaggerated fears rather than credible evidence.<sup>34</sup>

The combined effects of the Baren incident and the collapse of the world Communist movement substantially altered China's security perceptions. Looking to Pakistan as a source of growing religiosity and Central Asia as a locus of Uyghur nationalist sentiments, the CCP chose to abandon the liberal cultural policies of Hu Yaobang in favor of a more assimilationist approach toward the Uyghur region. China's security policies would grow steadily more invasive across the region, as evidenced by "Document No.7," which provided insights into the CCP's early efforts to counter Uyghur dissent in Central Asia.<sup>35</sup> The Uyghurs of the MENA would remain a secondary issue until the onset of the 2001 GWOT.

## ROAD TO DAMASCUS: UYGHURS AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

When the U.S. declared its GWOT in 2001, China's government ushered in a new phase of its campaign against the Uyghurs by capitalizing on the heightened security environment to pursue refugees by labeling them as "terrorists." In exchange for China's support for the invasion of Iraq,

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32 Saudi Arabia, in particular, has long advanced this purist interpretation of Islam. Wahhabism is a fundamentalist tradition in Sunni Islam stemming from the teachings of the 18th-century cleric Mohamed ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

33 Bayram Balci, "Central Asian Refugees in Saudi Arabia: Religious Evolution and Contributing to the Reislamization of their Motherland," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, no. 2, (2007): 12–21, <https://academic.oup.com/tsq/article-abstract/26/2/12/1681631?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

34 For a more detailed look into Saudi Arabian religious funding in China, see Mohammed Al-Sudairi "Chinese Salafism and the Saudi Connection," *The Diplomat*, October 23, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/chinese-salafism-and-the-saudi-connection/>

35 Nicolas Besquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," *China Journal* 44, (2000): 65–90.

the U.S. designated the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a terrorist organization in 2002.<sup>36</sup> Many activists and scholars have argued that this designation has aided China's Party-state in its campaign of cultural persecution in the Uyghur region. By labeling ETIM/ETIP as a terrorist organization, China's Party-state could declare nearly any Uyghur group or individual to be members or associates of ETIM and therefore as terrorists (see chapter three).

As the GWOT got underway, prominent Uyghur cultural figures worldwide found themselves facing ever greater scrutiny. One such figure was Ahmatjan Osman in Syria, a Uyghur poet known across the MENA for his classical verse. Osman has argued that Chinese authorities put pressure on Syria in 2004 to deport him out of fear that his poetry would unite Uyghur nationalists abroad.<sup>37</sup> Osman had to apply to the United Nations for refugee status after being expelled from Syria, despite 15 years of residence there, his marriage to a Syrian national, and having two children born in that country. When the news emerged that Syrian authorities had expelled Osman, 270 prominent figures in the world of Arabic poetry, including the Syrian poet and Nobel Literature Prize nominee Adunis, signed a petition and staged a protest against the deportation order.<sup>38</sup> He was granted Canadian citizenship in October 2004 and has been living there since.<sup>39</sup>

China also grew more assertive in controlling travelers to the *hajj* following the GWOT.<sup>40</sup> In 2006, the Saudi Arabian government refused to issue visas to Uyghur Muslims who had traveled to Pakistan to undertake *hajj*. The Chinese Embassy in Islamabad allegedly coordinated with its Saudi

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36 "The U.S. Removes Group Condemned by China From 'Terror' List," *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/7/us-removes-group-condemned-by-china-from-terror-list>.

37 "Ahmatjan Osman Speaks to Haleh Salah on His Experience as a Student in Syria [دمح | احمجان اوسمان يفت بل اطاك هت ب برجت نع حل اص نلا اه ل ائ د ح تم نام ث ع ن ا ج],» *BBC Arabic*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/tv-and-radio-40557722>; "Syria President al-Assad visits China," *China Daily*, June 22, 2004, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/22/content\\_341612.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/22/content_341612.htm).

38 "Ahmatjan Osman Speaks to Haleh Salah on His Experience as a Student in Syria."

39 Ibid.

40 For more on China's attempts to control the *hajj*, see Bradley Jardine and Lucille Greer "Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between the MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs," Uyghur Human Rights Project and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, forthcoming.

counterpart in blocking pilgrims from participating. China's MSS released a "Terrorist List" in 2007 with 20 names, including that of Osman Alihan, a Uyghur activist and businessman, who was subsequently deported from Pakistan in July 2007 for protesting outside the Saudi Arabian Embassy over the *hajj* visa scandal the year prior.<sup>41</sup>

As the 2008 Beijing Olympics approached, the TIP began publishing an Arabic-language magazine through Al-Qaeda's publishing house, as well as a video production operation issuing ominous threats to the international event.<sup>42</sup> In one video, an Olympic logo burned over Beijing before TIP member Abdullah Mansour appeared onscreen brandishing a Kalashnikov and said in Uyghur language: "We do not want to see any Muslim brothers and sisters who believe in Allah and his Holy Prophet Muhammad, who believe in the next life and the day of judgments, to get hurt by our fire targeted at China."<sup>43</sup> This was mostly bluster. TIP often claimed credit for attacks in China, but those claims lacked credibility.<sup>44</sup>

In 2008, two Uyghurs, Abdelsalam Abdallah Salim, and Akbar Omar were imprisoned in the UAE in connection with an alleged plot to blow up Dubai's Dragon Mart during the Olympics.<sup>45</sup> In June 2010, after almost two full years in solitary confinement in al-Wathba Prison, the men were sentenced to further ten-year terms reportedly without any judicial proceedings or legal support, in violation of their rights under the UAE's Code of Criminal Procedures.<sup>46</sup> The details of their case provide cause for doubt

41 "Fear of Torture or Ill-Treatment/Incommunicado Detention."

42 Zenn, "Jihad in China? Marketing the Turkistan Islamic Party."

43 Arthur Bright, "Islamic Terrorists Threaten Olympics in Video, Says U.S. Monitoring Group," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 9, 2008, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2008/0809/p99s01-duts.html>.

44 Jacob Zenn, "The Turkistan Islamic Party in Double-Exile: Geographic and Organizational Divisions in Uighur Jihadism," *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no. 17, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, September 7, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-turkistan-islamic-party-in-double-exile-geographic-and-organizational-divisions-in-Uighur-jihadism/>.

45 Hassan Hassan, "Uighur terrorists Jailed for Dragon Mart Bomb Plot," *The National UAE*, July 1, 2010, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/courts/uighur-terrorists-jailed-for-dragonmart-bomb-plot-1.583748?>

46 "يفسح عتلا عباطل اذكوي لم عل ا قيرف :ندحت مل ا دي بر عل ا ت ارم ال  
روغ يول ا نم نين طوم زاجت ل ل [United Arab Emirates: Task Force  
Confirms the Arbitrary Nature of the Detention of Uyghur Citizens],"

over the charges against them: reports indicate that Chinese Embassy officials had pointed out the two men and that the translation—from Uyghur to Mandarin to Arabic—was provided by Chinese government officials, and that their initial confessions had been coerced “through fear.”<sup>47</sup>

In 2011, their case was referred to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions. When the Working Group contacted the Emirati government for a response to its February 2011 decision, the UAE did not deny that the two men had been tortured, that their confessions had been obtained under the threat of rendition to China and the death penalty, that their trial had been delayed, and that these two men lacked legal support. The UN stated it “deplores that the [UAE] government has not provided it with the necessary elements to rebut these allegations.” On the question of extradition to China after their sentencing, the Emirati government stated: “The Government considers that it will be undertaken according to the treaty between the two countries that includes a provision allowing them to serve their sentence in their own country.” No word on Salim and Omar’s status has emerged since their sentencing in 2010.<sup>48</sup> Based on the evidence presented, the Working Group ruled the detention of the two Uyghurs in the UAE as arbitrary.<sup>49</sup> I have been unable to verify their extradition or rendition to China. Based on the available information, I believe that it is likely that they were.

The prestige of the Games provided the government of China with ample opportunity to cast its global surveillance dragnet wider. On July 17, 2008, agents from the Chinese Embassy in Ankara met with representatives from Turkish intelligence services to discuss Olympic security measures. The Chinese officers provided Turkey’s National Security Service with a list of 50 names they claimed were connected to ETIM/TIP and had arrived in

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*Alkarama*, November 20, 2011, <https://www.alkarama.org/ar/articles/alamarat-alrbyt-almthdt-fryq-alm-l-ywkd-altab-altsfy-llahtjaz-mwatnyn-mn-alwyghwr>.

47 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

48 Ibid.

49 “Opinions Adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its sixty-first session, 29 August-2 September 2011—No. 34/2011 (United Arab Emirates),” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, February 28, 2012, [https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?)

Turkey from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Five Turkish citizens on the list who had claimed asylum were then detained at China's request. They were later released.<sup>50</sup>

On July 5, 2009, Ürümchi descended into a melee of ethnic clashes and state violence that lasted for several days.<sup>51</sup> These events triggered a massive migration of Uyghur refugees from the Uyghur region to Turkey,<sup>52</sup> as many had lost hope for an independent civil society. Moderates like the economist Ilham Tohti were imprisoned and silenced in the Uyghur region. His work had long pointed to the economic disparities in the XUAR, arguing that the marginalization of Uyghurs was creating unnecessary unrest that could be alleviated with more inclusive development models. Tohti, who spent his career trying to bridge cultural differences between Uyghur and Han, was convicted in 2014 of inciting "ethnic hatred" and for heading an "eight-member separatist organization."<sup>53</sup> As a result of the ethnic violence, many Uyghurs began to outwardly express their religion and a deeper, renewed interest in the MENA through how they wore headscarves, the choice to wear their beards and hair long, and their choices in music and expression on WeChat. This expression was seen unilaterally as a threat by China's Party-state.<sup>54</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the Ürümchi events, senior Al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Yahya al Libi spoke about the plight of the Uyghurs, while the group's Maghreb affiliate made threats against Beijing.<sup>55</sup> China worked quickly to mitigate any further damage to its relations with the Islamic world through the Chinese Islamic Association. The Chinese government ordered the

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50 Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression*.

51 James Millward, "Introduction: Does the 2009 Urumqi Violence Mark a Turning Point?" *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 4, 2009: 347–360, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634930903577128>

52 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, 182.

53 "China: Uyghur Scholar's Trial a Travesty of Justice," Human Rights Watch, September 15, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/15/china-uyghur-scholars-trial-travesty-justice>

54 Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa, "Islam by Smartphone: Reading the Uyghur Islamic Revival on WeChat," *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1, 2019: 61–80, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2018.1492904?>

55 Pantucci, "Uyghur Terrorism in a Fractured Middle East."

Association to wage a media offensive in the Arabic language press: amongst a slew of articles that month, *The People's Daily Arabic* ran an interview on July 8 with Chen Guangyuan, using his Arabic name, Hilal al-Din, the then-President of the Chinese Islamic Association during which he stated that the “fraudulent riots” were against the spirit of Islam and constituted criminal acts.<sup>56</sup>

As the Arab Spring began in 2011, China substantially adjusted its security calculations. Protests that began in Tunisia spread to Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The self-immolation of Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor, to protest local corruption erupted into a challenge to the authoritarian regimes across the MENA.<sup>57</sup> Syria descended quickly into an all-out civil war, leading to China's growing fixation on the MENA as a destination for potentially radicalized Uyghurs interested in making their names through international *jihad*. In October 2012, in what was the first public statement by a Chinese official connecting Uyghurs with Syria, Major General Jin Yinan was quoted in Party-media as stating: “East Turkestan organizations are taking advantage of the Syrian civil war to obtain experience and raise the profile of Xinjiang among jihadists from other theatres.”<sup>58</sup>

By 2015, it was clear that TIP had an active army in Syria, with entire settlements populated by noncombatants, including their wives and children. Photographic evidence of TIP participation in Al-Nusra Front-led offensives against Syrian regime forces in Idlib province, including TIP's alleged key role in capturing a regime-held airbase at Abu Duhour, circulated that year.<sup>59</sup> By 2017 the group had taken control of the strategically important Jisr Al-Shughour. According to Mohanad Hage Ali, an expert

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56 Jardine and Greer, *The Chinese Islamic Association in the Arab World: The Use of Islamic Soft Power in Promoting Silence on Xinjiang*; Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

57 “Timeline: How the Arab Spring Unfolded,” *Al Jazeera*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/14/arab-spring-ten-years-on>.

58 Michael Clarke, “China's ‘War on Terrorism’: Confronting the Dilemmas of the ‘Internal-External’ Security Nexus,” in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions*, ed. Michael Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190922610.003.0002.

59 Clarke, “China's ‘War on Terrorism’: Confronting the Dilemmas of the ‘Internal-External’ Security Nexus.”

on the Syrian conflict at Carnegie Endowment Middle East Center, the TIP developed a reputation among civilian populations for “minding their own business” and not interfering in people’s lives.<sup>60</sup> Unlike Al-Qaeda, IS, and other militant groups in the region, TIP lacks the radical and divisive disdain for modern national politics and history. In the propaganda it distributes in Syria, in the form of the magazine *Turkestan al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Turkestan), the group appears more preoccupied with national independence for the Uyghur region than global jihad.<sup>61</sup>

Analysts speculated that Turkish intelligence was funneling Uyghurs to Syria. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh alleged in 2015 that Turkey’s National Intelligence Agency had facilitated a “ratline” to send Uyghur fighters “from China into Kazakhstan for eventual relay to Turkey, and then to IS territory in Syria.”<sup>62</sup> As many as 30,000 Uyghur refugees arrived in Turkey between 2010 to 2016, both from human trafficking networks across Southeast Asia and a short-lived Chinese passport scheme from 2015–2016 that allowed Uyghurs to flee to Turkey, according to Sean Roberts.<sup>63</sup> Although the reasons for this seemingly accommodationist and short-lived Chinese policy remain unknown, Roberts suggests it may have been an early effort to assist regional surveillance. Passport applications in the XUAR required biometric data, voice samples, and 3D images.<sup>64</sup> By late October 2016, the policy was reversed and it again became extremely difficult for Uyghurs to receive passports; many had their passports taken by the Xinjiang PSB for “safekeeping” the following year. Efforts to control Uyghur mobility have also grown more draconian. Police documents leaked from the XUAR detention facilities in Qaraqash County suggest that between 2017 and 2019, a large number of Uyghurs were sent to re-education centers merely for applying for passports.<sup>65</sup>

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60 Mohanad Hage Ali, “A Different Kind of Jihadi.”

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 “Timeline: How the Arab Spring Unfolded.”

64 Sean Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 186

65 For more on passport control policies see “*Ideological Transformation*”: *Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan*, (Washington, DC: Uyghur Human Rights Project, February 2020), [https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP\\_QaraqashDocument.pdf](https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP_QaraqashDocument.pdf)

While travel policies fluctuated in the XUAR, China's government also worked to curtail human trafficking networks, some of which had links to Southeast Asian terror networks and the conflicts in the MENA region.<sup>66</sup> In 2015, China accused Turkish diplomats in Shanghai and Kuala Lumpur of illegally issuing passports to Uyghurs. An article in the *People's Daily* accused these same diplomats of creating Uyghur "cannon fodder" for the conflict in Syria. 10 Turkish nationals and two Chinese citizens were arrested in Shanghai for the plot.<sup>67</sup> Human trafficking networks were also handing out fake travel documents. Police in Thailand found 250 blank Turkish passports in the apartment of Adem Karadag, a Uyghur suspect in the August 2015 Erawan Shrine bomb attack in Bangkok that killed 20 people.<sup>68</sup> While China's government was quick to point to Uyghur terrorist networks for the attack, Thai police identified the far-right Turkish nationalist organization "Gray Wolves"<sup>69</sup> as the main suspect for the bombing.<sup>70</sup> The group is alleged to have carried out the attack in retaliation for Bangkok's decision to deport Uyghur refugees to China in July 2015.

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66 "After Shootout, China Says Uyghur Militants a Threat to Indonesia," Reuters, March 17, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-indonesia-security/after-shootout-china-says-uighur-militants-a-threat-to-indonesia-idUSKCN0WJ12U>

67 Stefanie Kam Li Yee, "Uyghur Cross-Border Movement Into South East Asia," in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions*, ed. Michael Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190922610.003.0009.

68 Duchatel, "China's Foreign Fighters Problem."

69 The Gray Wolves adhere to a Pan-Turkic ideology that promotes solidarity between Turkic peoples.

70 Phillip Sherwell, "Bangkok Bombing: Was it the Grey Wolves of Turkey?" *The Telegraph*, August 25, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/thailand/11832701/Bangkok-bombing-Was-it-the-Grey-Wolves-of-Turkey.html>



**FIGURE 20:** Uyghur migration routes to the MENA.

Year	Country	Events
2009	Cambodia	In December 2009, Cambodia deported a group of 20 Uyghurs that had been fleeing China in the immediate aftermath of the violence in Ürümqi. Two days later, China signed 14 trade deals amounting to over \$850 million USD. <sup>72</sup>
2010	Laos	Memet Eli Rozi was part of a group of 22 Uyghurs that had fled the Uyghur region together in 2009. Together, they had sought asylum in Cambodia (see above), where some were detained and deported. Rozi then fled to Laos with seven of his family members who were then deported in 2010. <sup>73</sup>
2010	Myanmar	In 2010, the government of Myanmar deported 17 Uyghur men, after accusing them of being of involvement in “criminal activities.” The men, along with an additional ethnic Han Chinese man, were reportedly handed over on the Myanmar-China border by security officials of the Shan State Special Region 2. <sup>74</sup>

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*Run: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs.*

- 72 Seth Mydans, “After Expelling Uyghurs, Cambodia Approves Chinese Investments,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/22/world/asia/22cambodia.html>.
- 73 Shohret Hoshur, “Uyghur Prisoner Denied Medical Care,” *Radio Free Asia*, March 8, 2011, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/medical-03082011145740.html>
- 74 “China: Accounts for Uyghur Refugees Forcibly Repatriated to China,” Human Rights Watch, January 28, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/01/28/china-account-uyghur-refugees-forciblyrepatriated-china#>

Year	Country	Events
2011, 2012, and 2014	Malaysia	In 2011, the Malaysian government deported 11 Uyghurs to the PRC. All were charged with “separatism” and imprisoned upon their return to China. <sup>75</sup> The following year, Malaysia sent six Uyghur asylum seekers back to China ahead of a visit to Malaysia by China’s top political advisor Jia Qinglin. In 2014, Malaysia detained 155 Uyghurs, more than half of them children, who were found crammed into two apartments in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, carrying suspected fake Turkish passports. <sup>76</sup>
2014	Vietnam	In 2014, a group of Uyghur asylum seekers was detained in Vietnam for illegally crossing the border. Of this group, 16 Uyghurs escaped and barricaded themselves in a building on the Vietnamese side of the border. The Vietnamese guards retook the building, killing five. The remaining 11, including Rizwangul Tursun, were deported back to China. <sup>77</sup> In 2009, Vietnam and China signed a pact on land border management, in which both agreed to cooperate to “prevent and stop illegal migration” across the border

75 “Malaysia Discovers 155 Uyghurs Crammed into Two Apartments,” *Reuters*, October 4, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-malaysia-china-xinjiang-uyghers/malaysia-discovers-155- Uyghurs-crammed-into-two-apartments-idUKKCN0HT09020141004>.

76 “Malaysia Discovers 155 Uyghurs Crammed into Two Apartments.”

77 *Repatriation of Uyghurs in Vietnam*, Testimony to the Uyghur Tribunal, Parliament of the United Kingdom, (June 5, 2021) (statement of Dr. David Tran, MD), <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/05-1555-JUN-21-David-Tran-Repatriation-of-Uyghurs-in-Vietnam-English.pdf>; “Uyghur Woman Missing Three Years After Being Sent Back from Vietnam,” *Radio Free Asia*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/issing-06262017163529.html>; “Vietnam border shoot-out raises Uyghur questions,” *BBC*, April 29, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27200562>.

Year	Country	Events
<b>2014, 2015</b>	<b>Thailand</b>	<p>In spring 2014, Thai authorities arrested 424 Uyghur men, women, and children, half of whom were hiding in a human trafficking camp in Songkhla province.<sup>78</sup> Some of the Uyghurs claimed to have Turkish citizenship; accordingly, Thailand sent approximately 170 of the refugees, almost exclusively women and children, to Turkey. However, it also deported 109 men to China in July 2015.<sup>79</sup> The reality that Thailand has been the largest source of China's stage 2 and stage 3 transnational repression in terms of numbers is as much a matter of Thailand's poor record regarding refugees as it is of Chinese influence in the country.<sup>80</sup></p> <p>In August 2015, two Uyghur men were charged with a bombing in Bangkok, allegedly in retaliation for Thailand's forced return of illegal Uyghur migrants to China. After years of delayed court proceedings, they continue to plead "not guilty."<sup>81</sup></p>
<b>2015, 2020</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<p>In 2015, the Indonesian government arrested four Uyghurs for entering the country on fake passports and attempting to join the Eastern Indonesia Mujahideen, an organization affiliated with IS. The four men were sentenced to prison and fined 100 million rupiahs (\$6,812 USD). In September 2020, China's government paid their fines and extradited them back to the Uyghur region.<sup>82</sup></p>

78 "China presses Thailand to return Uighur refugees," *Financial Times*, April 3, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/35bbf33a-bb1d-11e3-948c-00144feabdc0>.

79 "Thai PM Defends Decision to Send Uyghurs Back to China," *Reuters*, July 9, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-uyghurs-turkey/thai-pm-defends-decision-to-senduighurs-back-to-china-idUSKCN0PJ18620150709>.

80 "Thailand: Hard Line on Refugees Leaves Thousands Vulnerable and at Risk," Amnesty International, September 28, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/09/thailand-hardline-on-refugees-leaves-thousands-vulnerable-and-at-risk/>.

81 "Lack of Interpreter Stalls Uyghurs Suspects' Trial in 2015 Bangkok Bombing," *Benar News*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/no-interpreter-08172021161730.html>

82 "Indonesia Deports 4 Uyghur Terrorism Suspects, to China," *Radio Free Asia*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deports-10232020190325.html>.

Between 2014 and 2016, 13 Uyghurs entered Indonesia via Malaysia with the intention of joining extremist groups, according to an analyst at the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict. However, four years prior, Indonesia rejected a prisoner swap with China's government—one Indonesian banker for four Uyghurs—on the basis that their charges were not the same; but, anonymous sources at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that Indonesia was concerned about the international pressure it could face should it return the Uyghurs to China.<sup>83</sup>

Southeast Asia, as noted in the table above, had grown hostile to Uyghurs; however, the violence of 2014 was unprecedented. Confirming the scale of refugee flows that year, China's MPS revealed that in their campaign against "jihadi immigration" they had "busted 262 human smuggling cases, seizing 352 suspects who allegedly organized such activities and 852 suspects who attempted to cross the border illegally."<sup>84</sup> Thanks to a recent testimony offered at the August 2021 Uyghur Tribunal, we have more knowledge of a massacre of Uyghurs that occurred on April 29, 2014, in Bac Phong Sinh, Vietnam. That year, a group of 16 Uyghurs allegedly escaped detention by the Vietnamese border guards and barricaded themselves in a building near the Bac Phong Sinh border crossing on the border between the PRC and Vietnam. A shootout followed, reportedly leaving two Vietnamese border guards dead, as well as three Uyghurs inside the complex. Several of the survivors committed suicide by jumping from the multistory building rather than fall into Chinese custody.<sup>85</sup> At the time, Vietnamese social media showed corpses being stacked onto wooden carts while others showed elderly women and small children being returned to China as Uyghur "extremists and terrorists."<sup>86</sup> On the same day as the massacre, Vietnamese border authorities arrested another 21 Uyghurs from China after being alerted by their Chinese counterparts that the group was trying to enter Vietnam by sea.<sup>87</sup> Vietnamese press, quick to cover the

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83 "Indonesia Deports 4 Uyghur Terrorism Suspects, to China."

84 Tran, testimony on *Repatriation of Uyghurs in Vietnam*.

85 Nga Pham, "Vietnam Border Shoot-out Raises Uighur Questions," *BBC*, April 29, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27200562>.

86 Tran, testimony on *Repatriation of Uyghurs in Vietnam*.

87 *Ibid.*

shoot-out, swiftly removed references to the XUAR in their reports. As the testimony notes, the immediate transfer of bodies and people to China without an investigation into the deaths of the Vietnamese border guards suggested the two countries have a secret agreement on such matters.<sup>88</sup> In December of 2014, another Uyghur was shot and killed on the Chinese side of the Vietnamese border.<sup>89</sup> In January 2015, the following month, another two Uyghurs were shot and killed by Chinese border guards while trying to cross into the Southeast Asian country revealing how dangerous these escape routes out of China had become. The closure of the Southeast Asia routes has only pushed Uyghurs deeper into reliance on dangerous routes out of China or into the hands of human traffickers.

Those who made the dangerous trek to Turkey had strong incentives to resettle in Syria. Upon arrival in Turkey, most Uyghurs were neither granted official refugee status nor citizenship, placing them in legal limbo. While their total numbers are unknown, Syria's ambassador to China repeatedly claimed that there were as many as 5,000 Uyghur fighters in Syria. Israeli intelligence put the figure at 3,000.<sup>90</sup> The majority of these Uyghurs are likely aligned with the TIP. The numbers of Uyghurs aligned with IS are lower: a leaked internal list of IS fighters from 2016 included 200 Uyghurs.<sup>91</sup> Overall, they represent just a minority of the 40,000 foreigners from more than 100 countries who have fought for IS.<sup>92</sup>

While the existence of these groups is a legitimate concern for China, it is doubtful that they pose a severe threat to China's national security while they continue fighting in Syria. Ordinary Uyghur refugees have been made to bear the consequences of TIP's activities. The existence of militant

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88 Ibid.

89 Xin Lin, "Two Uyghurs Shot Dead by Chinese Police Near China-Vietnam Border," *Radio Free Asia*, January 19, 2015, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/54ddbdcdfc.html>.

90 "Indonesia Deports 4 Uyghur Terrorism Suspects, to China."

91 Adam Taylor, "A Huge Leaked List of Islamic State Fighters Sounds Too Good to be True. Is It?" *Washington Post*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/03/10/a-huge-leaked-list-of-islamic-state-fighters-sounds-too-good-to-be-true-is-it/>.

92 Alessandro Arduino and Nordibek Soliev, "Malhama Tactical Threatens to Put China in Crosshairs," *Terrorism Monitor* 15, no 2., November 27, 2017, (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation), <https://jamestown.org/program/malhama-tactical-threatens-put-china-crosshairs/>.

groups, regardless of their size or capabilities, strengthens China's narrative of fighting terrorists abroad. This provides ample opportunities for foreign governments to actively cooperate with China in its transnational repression of Turkic peoples in the name of security.

## **“RELIGION IS A POWERFUL DRUG”: CHINA'S WAR ON ISLAM**

In step with a growing suspicion of foreign contacts, China's authorities adopted a harsher view of Islam and religious education. A series of secret speeches made by Xi Jinping in 2014 were recently leaked to the UK-based Uyghur Tribunal, providing insight into this hardline view of religious influence taking shape among the Party's top leadership.<sup>93</sup> Xi ordered authorities in the XUAR to draft legislation that would address religious “extremism.” The end result was the March 2017 “XUAR De-Extremification Regulation,” which put in place the groundwork for the region's mass re-education program.<sup>94</sup> China's government has also stated that the Regulation constitutes the legal basis for the Vocational Skills Education and Training Centers, the internment camps that shocked the world.<sup>95</sup>

These detention facilities represent an extreme view of “counterterrorism” taking shape within the CCP's top decision-making bodies. In his 2014 tour of the Uyghur region, Xi began to refer to extremism using medical analogies of pathogens, arguing that the population must be equipped with “immunity.”<sup>96</sup> At the time of his demand for Uyghur immunity, regions in the XUAR began carrying out early forms of re-education, arguing that efforts were “increasing the immunity... of ‘susceptible’ groups of people.”<sup>97</sup> In his May 28 speech that year, he stated that those who “watched [extremist] videos or propaganda materials” were “turning from an ordinary person into a devil who kills without blinking an eye.” Strikingly, almost the exact same wording was used by a former re-education detainee at a February

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93 Zenz, testimony on *The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction*.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

10, 2021, propaganda press conference in Beijing. “Religious extremism is a powerful psychedelic drug. Under its toxic influence, some people are obsessed with ‘martyrdom.’ Some persons—even whole families—become reckless criminals. Without eradicating the violent and terrorist ideology of religious extremism, violent terrorist activities will continue to replicate and multiply like cancer cells.”<sup>98</sup>

The state has often shifted its view on religious education, sometimes restricting it outright and at other times using it as a tool for political control. This is often facilitated through the work of the state-sponsored Chinese Islamic Association, which is credited in Chinese Arabic-language state media with distributing anti-extremist Islamic texts and conducting courses on anti-extremism.<sup>99</sup> In January 2017, a delegation of Chinese *imams* visited Al-Azhar University and met with both its president, Dr. Ibrahim al-Hadhad, and vice president, Dr. Ahmed Hasni, as part of a course on combating religious extremism.<sup>100</sup>

China’s authorities have taken increasingly bold steps to control religious education outside its borders as part of the “People’s War on Terror” and “Strike Hard” campaigns. In May 2017, Uyghur students studying in Egypt began receiving calls from Xinjiang’s PSB requesting that they return to the Uyghur region immediately. According to a Uyghur student I interviewed on condition of anonymity, those studying in Egypt were aware by this point that the Chinese government was detaining Uyghurs in reeducation centers. Word was swapped between Uyghurs over WhatsApp or in hushed conversation as they went about their daily lives, questioning whether the rumors that China was coming for them were true. Many of them vowed to remain in Egypt as long as they could—some even attempted to flee into Turkey, where they were detained by border security.<sup>101</sup> Those who stayed

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98 Ibid.

99 Jardine and Greer, *The Chinese Islamic Association in the Arab World: The Use of Islamic Soft Power in Promoting Silence on Xinjiang*.

100 Ahmed al-Bahiry, “[Delegation of Chinese Imams Visits Al-Azhar University (Pictures)] روص ره زال ءعم اء روزي نڤصل ءمىء ءفءو,” *al-Masry al-Youm*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1076461>.

101 “Uyghurs Studying Abroad Ordered Back to Xinjiang Under Threat to Families,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/ordered-05092017155554.html>.

believed that at Al-Azhar University, they would be safe from China's persecution. The same anonymous interviewee admits being astonished when the police came for them.<sup>102</sup> According to my conversation with Sara Gabr, a witness to the events and researcher with the Egyptian Commission on Rights and Freedoms, Egyptian arrests of Uyghurs had already begun as early as April 2017—three months before the July crackdown.

Men were allegedly detained and disappeared while women and children were allowed to flee to Turkey. By her unverified tally at the time, between 400 and 500 arrests occurred in the few months before the coming July crackdown. 194 arrests during this time occurred in Mansoura, which hosts a satellite campus of Al-Azhar.<sup>103</sup> I have been unable to independently verify these figures. As these initial arrests got underway, Uyghurs in Egypt started to receive increasingly ominous phone calls. In June, many were told by Xinjiang PSB officers that their families would suffer if they refused to return home, Gabr informed me.<sup>104</sup> Bai Kecheng, chairman of the Chinese consulate-affiliated Chinese Students and Scholars Association in Egypt, meanwhile, denied any knowledge of the orders for Uyghurs to return.<sup>105</sup>

In July 2017, the arrests increased dramatically. That month, Egypt's National Security Agency arrested dozens of Uyghurs—the majority of them Al-Azhar students in Cairo. Sheikh Mahmoud Muhammed, a representative of the Egyptian Uyghur community and trustee of the Association of Muslim Scholars of East Turkistan, claimed that the Chinese Embassy in Cairo raised its concerns to the Egyptian government in 2016 after the Ministry of Interior approved an additional 600 Uyghurs to study at Al-Azhar that year, raising the total to 3,000 by the time of the July 2017 raids. Muhammed said that the increased number of students prompted Beijing to alert the Chinese Embassy to “act swiftly” to stem the number of students, fearing that the increase might create a “security threat.” Soon after, China's government contacted the Egyptian president and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accusing Al-Azhar of accepting Chinese students without its approval, according to information

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102 Anonymous Uyghur Student, interview by Bradley Jardine and Lucille Greer.

103 Sara Gabr, interview

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

received from the *Sheikhs* in Al-Azhar.<sup>106</sup> These claims were repeated by a Uyghur student of Islamic sciences and Arabic language at Al-Azhar I interviewed under the condition of anonymity.<sup>107</sup>

Initial estimates based on Arabic-language reporting suggested that 70 Uyghurs were detained around the Nasr City district in Cairo, while 20 others were arrested at the Burj al-Arab Airport in Alexandria—additional reporting has since placed this figure at 200 arrests total.<sup>108</sup> The Egyptian Commission on Rights and Freedoms reached the same unverified tally.<sup>109</sup> According to my findings for the China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Database, more than 263 Uyghurs, the majority of them studying at Al-Azhar University, were detained.<sup>110</sup> Of these, I have identified 75 individuals who were sent to China either via deportation or who returned “voluntarily” after receiving ominous messages from the Xinjiang PSB warning them to do so.<sup>111</sup> Since arriving in the Uyghur region, many of them have received harsh court sentences. Sami Bari, a student who left the north African country after receiving a call from the XUAR PSB urging him to return home, was given life in prison.<sup>112</sup> At least two of the Uyghurs sent back from Egypt have been reported dead in Chinese police custody.<sup>113</sup>

The first strike of this campaign came on the night of July 3, 2017, as police officers raided a popular Uyghur restaurant called Aslam. The detainees were initially held in the police stations of Nasr City I and II, Elkhalfah, Elsalam II, El Nozha, and Heliopolis, according to reports at the time.<sup>114</sup>

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106 Khaled al-Masry, “Uighur Muslims in Egypt: A Welcoming Journey Ending with Deportation.”

107 Anonymous Uyghur Student.

108 “Uyghurs Arrested in Egypt Face Unknown Fate,” *Al Jazeera*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/7/27/uighurs-arrested-in-egypt-face-unknown-fate>.

109 Sara Gabr, interview.

110 “China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Database.”

111 Ibid.

112 Shohret Hoshur, “Uyghur Group Defends Detainee Database After Xinjiang Officials Allege ‘Fake Archive,’” *Radio Free Asia*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/database-02112021174942.html>.

113 “Two Uyghur Students Die in China’s Custody Following Voluntary Return from Egypt,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/students-12212017141002.html>

114 “Uyghurs Arrested in Egypt Face Unknown Fate,” *Al Jazeera*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/7/27/uighurs-arrested-in-egypt-face-unknown-fate>.

Unlike in the months before July, women, and children as young as fourteen and fifteen were detained. Gabr told me that there were 70 Uyghurs detained in the Nasr City police station and 80 at Elkhalfah. The Uyghur detainees she was in contact with in the police stations reported that Chinese officers were conducting group interrogations in Mandarin and physically assaulting detainees. Most of the people in these interrogations were forced to sign papers confessing to involvement with terrorist organizations.

China's role in the events at Al-Azhar was likely the result of a security agreement signed between the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior and the PRC's MPS the previous month.<sup>115</sup> The Egyptian Interior Minister, Magdy Abdel Ghaffar, met with China's Deputy Minister of Public Security, Chen Zhimin, during his visit to Cairo. According to a statement from the Egyptian government, the two officials discussed a number of specialized security fields, including the spread of terrorism and extremist ideologies during their visit.<sup>116</sup>

In addition to police stations, several Uyghurs were taken to the Mogamma, a catch-all administrative building that handles paperwork for foreign residents. Uyghurs who were taken there who had no legal status were immediately deported to China. Those with legal status had that legal status revoked. Those people were then sent on to third countries, including Turkey and the UAE. From the police stations, some Uyghurs were threatened by Chinese officials, made to sign papers confessing involvement with terrorist organizations, blindfolded, and sent to the Chinese Embassy where they were interrogated and disappeared.<sup>117</sup>

The second strike of the campaign began on the evening of July 4. According to a Uyghur I interviewed on condition of anonymity, Egyptian security services began rounding up Uyghur students in houses, restaurants, and even the streets as they tried to escape. Next, they stormed Masjid Musa, the main mosque for Cairo's Uyghur community.<sup>118</sup> Gabr

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115 "‘They are Not Welcome Here:’ Report on the Uyghur Crisis in Egypt," Freedom of Thought and Expression Law Firm, October 1, 2017, [https://afteegypt.org/en/academic\\_freedoms/2017/10/01/13468-afteegypt.html](https://afteegypt.org/en/academic_freedoms/2017/10/01/13468-afteegypt.html).

116 "Egypt, China sign technical cooperation document in specialized security fields," *State Information Service*, June 20, 2017.

117 Sara Gabr, interview.

118 Anonymous Uyghur Student.

heard reports of two Uyghur men arrested at a mosque but was unable to verify at the time.<sup>119</sup> Some students were able to hide in other districts of the city since District Seven—Nasr City—was known as a Uyghur neighborhood. Friends and classmates called each other over the phone and sent messages on WhatsApp, desperate to find out if they were safe.<sup>120</sup> Gabr, whose grandfather owned a building on a majority-Uyghur street, recalls seeing Uyghur women and children running in the night as police cars circled them.<sup>121</sup> Security forces gained information on where Uyghurs were living from landlords and real estate brokers. After entering their homes and arresting them, students' personal effects were confiscated, including cell phones, laptops, and books, and searched for hints of extremist ideology, according to Abd al-Akhir, a former student who fled Egypt. Al-Akhir said in a 2020 interview: "When the campaign was launched, I was outside with my family and one of my friends called and warned me about it. I spent several nights, with my wife and three children, running away from Cairo. I ended up staying in the countryside with one of my teachers. We knew about a certain 'wanted' list at the airport. I was scared, thank God I wasn't on that list and fled to safety."<sup>122</sup>

Gabr also believed that there was a specific list of names the Egyptian police were targeting. However some arrests remained arbitrary: security officials would go to an address to arrest a particular individual, but if that person was not present, they detained the person who was there instead. Sometimes, the police only came to Uyghur houses with instructions: "you have three or four days. Gather your money and your papers, and get out."<sup>123</sup> Gabr told me that 30 Uyghurs were arrested at Cairo International Airport, three to five were arrested at Burj al-Arab International Airport in Alexandria, and three were arrested at Hurghada International Airport near Sharm el-Sheikh as they tried to flee the country. These arrests outside of Cairo, she theorized, could be due to the presence of Al-Azhar

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119 Sara Gabr, interview.

120 Anonymous Uyghur Student, interview.

121 Sara Gabr, interview.

122 Khaled al-Masry, "Uighur Muslims in Egypt: A Welcoming Journey Ending with Deportation."

123 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

University satellite campuses in Alexandria that may have hosted Uyghur students.<sup>124</sup> It is a common strategy for political refugees to use airports outside of the capital to get out, under the assumption that there will be a smaller security presence outside of the capital. The Egyptian Commission on Rights and Freedoms along with other organizations attempted to send lawyers to the airports to assist fleeing Uyghurs, but they were turned away in most cases.<sup>125</sup>

Most of the Uyghurs stopped at the airport were allowed to flee to Turkey or Malaysia, but, by Gabr's count, three or four were sent to China. From the entire July crackdown, the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, working with Amnesty International, verified that 12 people were deported back to China. Gabr suspects that the actual number was much higher.<sup>126</sup> A later bulletin from Amnesty International put the total number of deportations at 22.<sup>127</sup> My own findings for the China's Transnational Repression Dataset by the Oxus Society and UHRP estimate that there have been 274 cases of Uyghur detentions and refolements from Egypt since 2001.<sup>128</sup> The Commission's source, a Uyghur detainee who sometimes had access to a phone while in police custody, disappeared in October and it has been difficult to obtain information since. As Uyghurs fled Egypt or went into hiding, following up on the fates of detainees became extremely challenging. The crackdown drastically diminished the Uyghur communities in Cairo, where they had a visible presence, and elsewhere in the country.<sup>129</sup>

I have learned from interviews with Uyghur sources in the UAE that Chinese police coordinated the Egypt crackdowns with Dubai. Uyghur students who attempted to flee to the UAE from Egypt were picked up as a part of this coordination. Around the summer of 2017, Maryam (pseudonym) reportedly witnessed China's Ministry of State Security attempting

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124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Sara Gabr, interview.

127 "Egypt: Further information: More Uighur students at risk of forcible return," Amnesty International, August 1, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1268482017ENGLISH.pdf>.

128 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

129 Sara Gabr, interview.

to intercept Uyghurs in Dubai. These Uyghurs had fled the crackdown in Egypt's Al-Azhar University.<sup>130</sup> According to Maryam, while she was there, Chinese officers entered a Uyghur restaurant and showed patrons photographs of Uyghur “fugitives” from Egypt in order to gain information about their current whereabouts. “We were all so shocked!” she says.<sup>131</sup> Maryam’s account speaks to how China’s allies and the PRC’s intelligence services coordinate their efforts to find Uyghurs living abroad, even those in flight.<sup>132</sup> “Chinese officers also visited the house I was living in with other Uyghurs,” Maryam told me. “They said the owner gave them an advertisement to rent rooms and that they wished to inspect the building. The owner is our friend however and we called to ask whether she had given them permission to enter. She said no such permission had ever been given and instructed us to refuse them entry.”<sup>133</sup> Other Uyghurs in her district had similar encounters with plainclothes officers during that time, according to Maryam.

Saudi Arabia, which also appears on China’s list of “suspicious” countries, has increasingly cooperated with Beijing. Saudi authorities have deported at least six Uyghurs to China in the last four years who were either conducting pilgrimages to Mecca or living in the country legally, putting them at risk of arrest on their return.<sup>134</sup> In 2020, Saudi Arabia joined 45 others in signing a letter of support for China’s campaign of mass detention in the XUAR. This is an about-face for Saudi policy, which previously protected Uyghurs as permanent residents due to their status as oppressed Muslims, a policy created under King Faisal (1964–1975).<sup>135</sup> As a result of this shift, many Uyghurs fled the Kingdom for Turkey before their passports expired, according to

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130 Maryam (pseudonym, a Uyghur living in the United Arab Emirates), online video interview by Bradley Jardine, June 25, 2021, video and audio.

131 Maryam, interview.

132 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

133 Ibid.

134 Jilil Kashgary, “Four Uyghurs Facing Persecution After Deportation by Saudi Arabia to China Identified,” *Radio Free Asia*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deportation-10162020150910.html>

135 Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “The Communist Party of China’s United Front Work in the Gulf: The ‘Ethnic Minority Overseas Chinese’ of Saudi Arabia as a Case Study,” *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, March 2018, <https://kfcris.com/pdf/364dd98d47dae1c81e9eb8362a086bf85af3e7e7f302e.pdf>

confidential data I have reviewed. According to a witness I interviewed under the condition of anonymity, Chinese diplomats briefly intensified their communications with the Uyghur community in Saudi Arabia in late 2016. They allegedly asked Uyghur residents what the “dominant ideological trends” among overseas students were, how they were impacted by Wahhabism, and their thoughts on the Kingdom’s internal politics.<sup>136</sup>

Members of the Saudi Uyghur community have reported losing contact with their relatives in the Uyghur region starting in early 2017, according to the same anonymous witness I spoke with.<sup>137</sup> Relatives have asked that Uyghurs living in Saudi Arabia stop calling home or do not respond to telephone calls or WeChat messages. Some have made inquiries with the Chinese consulate, but their efforts are either ignored, or they are told that “the situation is too sensitive” to make further inquiries.<sup>138</sup> The Chinese consulate in Saudi Arabia has also ceased renewing passports for Uyghurs living in the Kingdom, providing them instead with a one-way “passport” back to the PRC and almost certain detention.<sup>139</sup> The Chinese Embassy and consulate have disputed the charge that they have suspended consular services for their Uyghur “brothers and sisters.”<sup>140</sup>

According to the same witness, 10 Uyghur graduates from the Islamic University of Madinah were detained in Chinese camps after they returned to China due to the nature of their studies in Saudi Arabia. I was only able to confirm the identity of Jarallah Rahmatullah by the time of publication. All graduated from the College of Sharia, the College of the Holy Qur’an, or the College of Dawa.

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136 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

137 Ruth Ingram, “What Happens When the Uyghurs Come Home?” *The Diplomat*, November 6, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/what-happens-when-the-uyghurs-come-home/>.

138 Jilil Kashgary, “Uyghurs in Saudi Arabia Flee to Turkey As Chinese Embassy Ends Passport Renewals,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/turkey-01312020165513.html>.

139 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

140 Anuj Chopra, “Chinese Uighurs in Saudi face impossible choice,” *Agence France-Presse*, January 25, 2020, <https://autos.yahoo.com/chinese-uighurs-saudi-face-impossible-choice-021812491.html>

The *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca has also come under siege in recent years. In July 2018, Saudi Arabia detained Osman Ahmat Tohti, a Uyghur living in Turkey, while he was conducting *hajj*. Tohti's wife, Sudinisa, and three of their six children remain in Turkey, where they have lived since 2015. According to Sudinisa, Tohti was detained in May 2014 by police in his home city of Hotan in the Uyghur region for two months.<sup>141</sup> This incident made him "suspicious." His business collapsed the following year, culminating in his decision to flee China with his family. After he was detained by Saudi authorities for half a year in 2018, he was then forcibly repatriated to China in February 2020 despite having a permanent residency card that permitted him to live legally in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. I have identified at least three other Uyghurs who were deported to China from Saudi Arabia over the past four years, including Bahtiyar Haji, a trader from the XUAR capital Ürümqi; a man from Hotan named Yaqupjan (surname unavailable), and Nurullah Ablimit, originally from Qāshqār, who was living in Saudi Arabia after initially moving there to study.<sup>142</sup> Ablimit was likely detained in connection with his father, Ablimit Damollam, a well-known religious scholar in Qāshqār, who died in police custody in 2017.<sup>143</sup>

The deployment of Chinese surveillance technology is occurring in this region as well, with companies like Huawei operating in Mecca and Medina. Huawei, although technically private, retains a close connection to the CCP. This connection could allow the China's Party-state to mine the data of Muslim migrants and visitors to Saudi Arabia and their contacts in the PRC. In 2016, Huawei collaborated with the Saudi Ministry of Interior to build a Unified Security Operations Center (911) to handle emergency calls during *hajj*.<sup>144</sup> In 2019, Huawei and the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah penned an agreement to develop smartphone apps,

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141 Jilil Kashgary, "Four Uyghurs Facing Persecution After Deportation by Saudi Arabia to China Identified," *Radio Free Asia*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deportation-10162020150910.html>.

142 Jilil Kashgary, "Four Uyghurs Facing Persecution After Deportation by Saudi Arabia to China Identified."

143 Ibid.

144 Jardine and Greer, *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between MENA States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

internet, and TV channels to improve the quality of digital services during *hajj*.<sup>145</sup>

China's Party-state uses any data connections to Saudi Arabia to detain Muslims in China. In 2019, a Muslim Uyghur was stopped at mainland China's border with Hong Kong and interrogated for three days because someone on his WeChat contact list had "checked in" at Mecca. The authorities' concern was that the person had traveled on an unofficial pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a crime under Chinese law.<sup>146</sup> Should pilgrims call 911 during *hajj* or download an app during their visit, there could be consequences for them or their relatives in the XUAR.

Transnational repression is also spreading to other countries in the region. According to my data, Uyghurs have been detained in Morocco, the UAE, and Qatar. The case of Idris Hasan (also known as Aishan Yideresi), who was detained in Morocco in July 2021, highlights China's use of overlapping mechanisms such as international organizations like Interpol and bilateral extradition treaties to pursue Uyghurs. Hasan, a computer engineer, had been working as a translator for a Uyghur diaspora news outlet in Turkey documenting China's repression in the Uyghur region. As he began to fear for his safety following several detentions by Turkish authorities he chose to flee to Morocco, but was instead detained on July 19 in Casablanca Airport and sent to a prison near Tiffet.<sup>147</sup> China's government had issued an Interpol Red Notice for his capture, on the basis of his being.<sup>148</sup> a "member of ETIM." This accusation was found to be without evidence and Interpol suspended the Red Notice in August 2021, citing its bylaws forbidding persecution on political, religious, or ethnic grounds.<sup>149</sup> Moroccan courts proceeded to try Hasan however, referencing its own extradition

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145 "Saudi Arabia Partners with Huawei on Smart Umrah and Hajj Technology," *Arabian Business*, February 24, 2019, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/technology/413831-saudi-arabia-partners-with-huawei-on-smart-umrah-hajj-technology?>

146 Sarah Cook, "Worried about Huawei? Take a Look at Tencent," Freedom House, March 29, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/worried-about-huawei-take-closer-look-tencent?>

147 Ehsan Azigh, "Moroccan Court Rules in China's Favor to Extradite Uyghur Accused on 'Terrorism,'" *Radio Free Asia*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/idris-hasan-12162021175312.html>

148 Azigh, "Moroccan Court Rules in China's Favor to Extradite Uyghur Accused on 'Terrorism.'"

149 Ibid.

treaty with China from 2016—part of a strategic partnership between the two countries that included economic and financial investments.<sup>150</sup> Hasan has been unable to speak with his wife and three children since his detention. On December 16, 2021, the Court of Cassation in Morocco ordered his extradition.<sup>151</sup>

The UAE has similarly emerged as an increasingly hostile environment for Uyghurs since it signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China in 2018. In 2017, Uyghur refugee Huseyin Imintohti disappeared in Dubai immediately after filing his asylum application to the UNHCR offices in Dubai.<sup>152</sup> Imintohti fled his hometown of Hotan in 2013 for Istanbul but was deported to the UAE in 2017 after Turkey's National Security Agency detained him on account of an Interpol Red Notice issued by China.<sup>153</sup> His last message to his wife Nigare was “please follow up if you don't hear from me within three days.” She told *RFA* reporters that she believes he has been sent to China. “I believe that [October 12] is the date of his detention, because prior to that we were in touch nearly every day, as he was unable to sleep without hearing the sound of our new baby's voice.”<sup>154</sup> Another Uyghur Ahmad Talip (Ahmetjan Abdulla) had lived in the UAE with his family for six years before he was detained while collecting documents at a local police station for his brother in 2018. Talip said police took his blood sample while he was imprisoned at the request of China's government.<sup>155</sup> A Dubai court ordered his release, but when his wife Amanissa went to pick him up, she learned that he had been moved to a different prison and was in Interpol's custody.

Amanissa unsuccessfully appealed to Interpol and the UN to have him released. She said her actions caused Dubai police to threaten her entire

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150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.

152 Shohret Hoshur and Joshua Lipes, “Uyghur Asylum Seeker Detained in Dubai Feared Deported to China,” *Radio Free Asia*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/dubai-11282017160655.html>.

153 Shohret Hoshur, “Uyghur Asylum Seeker Detained in Dubai Feared Deported to China.”

154 Ibid.

155 “Uyghur Speaks Out About Husband's ‘Deportation’ From UAE,” *Middle East Eye*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uyghur-speaks-out-against-husbands-deportation-uae>.

family with deportation to China if she continued to press the case. Talip was transferred again, and she has not heard from him since. Police told her that he was deported to China and imprisoned two days after his last transfer. Two Uyghurs I spoke with who recently fled the UAE and wished to remain anonymous also suggested growing monitoring of the population in that country. One interviewee recounted how she moved to Dubai in 2012 and was comfortable until 2017 when police in her hometown in the XUAR began questioning her family. “They would call my brother and ask questions about me. They also asked him to send them photographs of me,” she said. After three years of phone calls and messages, she decided to move to Canada, where she has been ever since. Another anonymous interviewee who lived in the UAE from 2008 to July 2019 informed me that he had also received calls from regional police in the XUAR after 2017. “[Police officers in the XUAR] told me they visited my family and wanted to know when I would be coming back to visit them.” He lost all contact with his family when he fled to the United States in 2019.

Reporting from August 2021 suggests that the UAE may be functioning as a regional intelligence hub for Chinese intelligence and security services. Norway-based Uyghur activist Abduweli Ayup spoke with three Uyghurs in Turkey in 2019, who had been forced to spy on the diaspora there for China’s government. The men said they flew to Dubai to collect burner phones and payment from Chinese intelligence officers stationed in the UAE.<sup>156</sup> This matches other claims made in August 2021 by Jasur Abibula, a Netherlands-based Uyghur and former husband of Asiye Abdulahed. Abdulahed rose to prominence for leaking the “China Cables” about the mass incarceration program in the Uyghur region to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.<sup>157</sup> Abibula said he was lured to Dubai where he met with two MSS officers. The agents reportedly handed him a USB and instructed him to insert it into his ex-wife’s computer to infect it with spyware. The MSS reportedly offered him cash, a room in the

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156 “Detainee Says China has Secret Prison in Dubai, Holds Uyghurs,” *Associated Press*, August 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/china-dubai-uyghurs-60d049c387b99b1238e5d5f1d3bb3330>.

157 *Ibid.*

Hilton, and toys for his children.<sup>158</sup> According to Abibula, the officers were prone to using sticks as well as carrots in their recruitment efforts. During a drive past the sand dunes outside Dubai, one of the men informed him: “If we kill and bury you here, nobody will ever be able to find your body.”<sup>159</sup> Abibula is now in the Netherlands and showed international media photos of the agents, along with his hotel and plane tickets to support his allegations. The same *Associated Press* report also suggested that China’s government may be operating black site detention facilities in Dubai, but was unable to verify these claims.<sup>160</sup> I have also been unable to verify these claims; over the course of writing this report, I have not encountered any similar claims except in a confidential 2021 ICC court filing which suggested a black site detention facility may be operated by China from Dushanbe Airport in Tajikistan.

In 2019, another Uyghur man named Ablikim Yusuf was stuck in Doha’s Hamad International Airport in Qatar waiting to be deported to China when his video testifying to his situation went viral. This galvanized Uyghur activists, who were able to prevent his deportation to China.<sup>161</sup> Yusuf was eventually transferred to the United States. He had been traveling not with a passport but a travel document that would have only allowed him to return to China.<sup>162</sup> This practice is widespread, rising dramatically after 2017, and has impacted large numbers of Uyghurs in every region this study has surveyed.

As China’s transnational repression grows across the MENA, refugees are increasingly fleeing to Europe and North America to escape the long arm of China’s security services. But with the ascent of digital surveillance technology, even the democratic world is being infiltrated by the Party-state.

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158 Ibid.

159 Ibid.

160 “Detainee Says China has Secret Prison in Dubai, Holds Uyghurs,” *Associated Press*, August 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/china-dubai-uyghurs-60d049c387b99b1238e6bd5f1d3bb3330>.

161 Megha Rajagopalan, “A Muslim Man Who Had Faced Deportation to China From Qatar is Now Headed to the U.S.,” *Buzzfeed*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/ablikim-yusuf-uighur-qatar-china>.

162 For more information on this phenomenon see *Weaponized Passports: The Crisis of Uyghur Statelessness*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Great Wall of Steel

**“If I destroy you, what business is it of yours?”**

Liu Cixin, *The Dark Forest*

**CANADIAN UYGHUR ERKIN KURBAN’S** ordeal began in 2013. He had just applied for a visa to China to visit his mother in the Uyghur region when officials from the MPS called his brother in the XUAR. They requested that he pass along a message to Erkin: Erkin would receive a visa only if he would agree to cooperate with China’s Ministry of Public Security.<sup>1</sup> Three days after his arrival in Ürümchi, he was summoned to an MPS office and interrogated for 10 hours about his activities and contacts in Canada and the United States. In particular, the officials were determined to find out whether he had been in contact with Uyghur human rights activist and businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer. When Kurban objected, saying that he was a Canadian citizen, a Chinese official took his Canadian passport and threw it on the ground in disgust.<sup>2</sup>

Eight years prior to Erkin’s 2013 interrogation, in 2005, Rebiya Kadeer was released from a Chinese prison after being jailed for sending politically sensitive newspaper clippings to contacts overseas. She remains exiled in the United States and previously served as leader of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). China’s security services frequently target the activist and infamously blamed her for orchestrating the 2009 unrest in Ürümchi. There is no credible evidence for her having influenced events in the XUAR capital at the time. Nevertheless, accusations of having links to Kadeer can prove very dangerous for Uyghurs like Erkin Kurban. Out

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1 Hall and Jardine, “*Your Family Will Suffer*”: *How China is Hacking, Surveilling, and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies*.

2 Ibid.

of everyone I have surveyed for this study, the ones closest to Kadeer have consistently proven to be the most vulnerable. To date, 38 of her relatives have been detained or harassed by authorities in the Uyghur region in an attempt to silence her.<sup>3</sup>

According to Erkin, his interlocutors were well informed about him and the Uyghur community in North America. MPS officers asked him to send back reports on the Uyghur diaspora community in Canada after his return, leveling a clear threat: commit espionage or never see his family again. The security services reportedly gave Erkin 48 hours to leave the country. He objected, offering to cooperate in order to be allowed to stay in the Uyghur region longer. MPS officers then had him write pages of handwritten information; Erkin claims to have lied about all of it. For the remainder of his stay in the Uyghur region, he was summoned to the MPS station once a week to hand over more information. Upon returning to Canada, Erkin stopped cooperating and reported the incident to Rebiya Kadeer and the Canadian Intelligence Services. Chinese intelligence officers called him several times over the following months before the calls stopped abruptly in summer 2015.<sup>4</sup>

Similar reporting in Canadian media include five accounts of local Uyghurs who had been coerced to commit espionage.<sup>5</sup> Other countries have seen similar reports. In 2015, Eysa Imin was detained in China after returning from Malaysia and told he would only be released if he agreed to spy for the Chinese government. After agreeing to cooperate, he met with a state security officer every week for a year. He claims he revealed no names and refused to spy on Uyghurs living abroad. The Xiniang PSB then urged him to return to China to spy on Uyghurs in the XUAR. Instead, Imin went public with his story on a webcast. Afterward, China's government

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3 Shohret Hoshur, "Sister of Uyghur Rights Advocate Rebiya Kadeer Confirmed to Have Died After Release From Detention," *Radio Free Asia*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/kadeer-sister-05112021031745.html>.

4 Paul Mooney and David Lague, "Holding the Fate of Families in its Hands, China Controls Refugees Abroad," *Reuters*, December 30, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-uyghur/>.

5 Mamatjan Juma and Joshua Lipes, "Uyghur-Canadian Interrogated Pressured to Spy for Chinese Authorities," *Radio Free Asia*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/canadian-04242015121248.html>.

arrested five of his family members in the Uyghur region, sentencing one—his older brother—to 25 years in prison. Imin has since moved to Germany, where he awaits the results of his asylum application.<sup>6</sup>

The Chinese state's goal in infiltrating Uyghur societies overseas is not simply to gather information about Uyghur activities abroad but to coerce them into silence. This strategy became more pronounced in 2021. On the 100th birthday of the CCP, General Secretary Xi Jinping had some strong words for the country's adversaries: "The Chinese people will never allow foreign forces to bully, oppress, or enslave us," he said. "Whoever nurses delusions of doing that will bash their heads bloody against the Great Wall of Steel built from the flesh and blood of 1.4 billion Chinese people."<sup>7</sup> Though such belligerent rhetoric is familiar in Communist Party discourse and should not be taken at face value, the use of the Great Wall of Steel metaphor has sinister undertones for overseas Uyghurs critical of China's policies in the Uyghur region.

In 2017, Xi Jinping urged security forces to erect a "Great Wall of Steel" around the XUAR. This figurative expression, backed by the literal expansion of Chinese arms and security into neighboring Central and South Asia (see chapters two and three), refers to efforts to create a unified voice opposing any criticism of Party policy in the region. Today, this "wall" is bolstered by digital surveillance, cyberattacks on adversaries, and efforts to stifle debate far beyond China's borders. These attacks, collectively defined as "stage 1" forms of transnational repression (see methodology), are the core focus of this final chapter, which assesses how China's government has sought to undermine Uyghur activism in the democratic world.

My research shows that China's drive to intimidate, harass, and control Uyghurs has increased in the last five years, in correlation with the Party-state's activities in the XUAR and its efforts to detain or forcibly

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6 "China recruits Uyghurs to Spy on Their Own While Abroad: Report," *ANI News*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/china-recruits-uyghurs-to-spy-on-their-own-while-abroad-report20210217224344/>.

7 Cheryl Teh, "Photos Show How Xi's Communist Party Flexed its Strength on its 100th Anniversary with Fighter Jets and Troop Displays," *Business Insider*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.in/international/news/photos-show-how-xiaposs-communist-party-flexed-its-strength-on-its-100th-anniversary-with-fighter-jets-and-troop-displays/slidelist/84015989.cms>.

return Uyghurs living abroad. In particular, China's government has focused its efforts on cyberattacks, with a recorded 2,774 cases, intelligence collection with 2,009 cases, and intimidation, including phone calls, direct threats, and surveillance, with a documented 526 cases. Moreover, these efforts primarily focus on Uyghurs living in the West, with 3,044 recorded cases located in Europe, 81 in the Asia-Pacific, and an additional 130 in North America.<sup>8</sup>

## THE FOXCATCHER: CHINA'S HUNT FOR UYGHUR EXILES

On June 4, 1989, the PLA killed protesters in Tiananmen Square who had gathered to advocate for political reforms. Hundreds died, and the authorities arrested large numbers from the thousands they detained for their participation.<sup>9</sup> In the immediate aftermath, then-Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping praised the troops responsible, describing them as a “great wall of iron and steel” before noting that “the army, under the leadership of the Party, will remain the defender of the country, the defender of socialism, and the defender of the public interest.”<sup>10</sup>

Since the Tiananmen Square Massacre, China has ruthlessly pursued the movement's leaders overseas. The defection of Xu Lin in 1990, a Chinese diplomat in the Washington DC embassy, offered the world a glimpse into this campaign. Lin revealed how China's intelligence services, the MSS, and the MPS, worked through embassy education departments to monitor Chinese nationals living on American soil. Deploying techniques that are being used against the Uyghurs today, agents threatened the safety of dissidents' relatives still living in China.

In the mid-1990s, the leaked “Document No.7” provided insight into how the CCP began to view overseas Uyghurs as a potential threat that required transnational surveillance. The document states: “Considering

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8 Hall and Jardine, “*Your Family Will Suffer*”: *How China is Hacking, Surveilling, and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies*.

9 Jiayang Fan, “Memories of Tiananmen Square,” *New Yorker*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/memories-of-tiananmen-square>.

10 “Deng Says His Open Door Policies Will Not Change: Hails ‘Great Wall of Iron and Steel,’” *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-06-09-mn-1828-story.html>.

the threat of ethnic separatist activities outside the border, carry out all necessary dialogue and struggle and strengthen the investigation of such movements. Collect the information on related events and be especially vigilant against outside forces in their attempts to make the so-called 'East Turkestan' problem international."<sup>11</sup> "Document No.7" instructs Chinese officials to "divide the external separatist forces, win over most of them, and alienate the remaining small number and fight against them. In addition, establish home bases in the regions or cities with high Chinese and overseas Chinese populations."<sup>12</sup>

This overseas work has fallen mainly to China's powerful security services. The MSS is a civilian intelligence agency that gathers information on overseas communities, as well as domestic matters concerning "security cases and issues 'linked to foreign factors' or 'foreign organizations,' including those operating inside China, or those trying to enter China."<sup>13</sup> The MPS has a mandate of law enforcement and domestic policing. However, it is also engaged in transnational repression of the Uyghurs, as that mandate includes handling issues related to "ethnic separatism." Uyghurs I have surveyed have been coerced into monitoring the activities of fellow activists overseas and do so at the request of MPS agents.<sup>14</sup> Finally, local PSBs—which fall under the jurisdiction of the MPS—have been known to contact Uyghurs from the XUAR.<sup>15</sup> In 2004, U.S.-based Uyghur Parhat Yasin received calls from PSB officers from his birth town of Ghulja. Speaking in Uyghur, a PSB agent promised him that his wife and children would receive passports to travel if he would provide information about Uyghur activists in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

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11 *The Fifth Poison: The Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas*, (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project, November 28, 2017), <https://uhrp.org/report/fifth-poison-harassment-uyghurs-overseas-html/>

12 *The Fifth Poison: The Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas*.

13 *Repression Across Borders: The CCP's Illegal Harassment and Coercion of Uyghur Americans*, (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project, August 28, 2019), <https://uhrp.org/report/new-uyghur-human-rights-project-uhrp-report-details-how-chinese-government-engaged/>.

14 Hall and Jardine, "Your Family Will Suffer": *How China is Hacking, Surveilling and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies*.

15 Ibid.

16 *The Fifth Poison: The Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas*.

By the early 2000s, the monitoring of Uyghurs had become a global operation. In 2006, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade stated that “it is likely that Chinese authorities seek to monitor Uyghur groups in Australia and obtain information on their membership and supporters. In pursuing this information, Chinese authorities would not necessarily exclude sources who do not have a political profile.”<sup>17</sup> Around this period, asylum seekers in Australia reported fears that informants were monitoring their activities. In a 2011 Australian refugee tribunal, a witness noted that her parents in the Uyghur region were contacted by XUAR security officials immediately after she arrived in Australia by student visa. The officials informed them that there would be severe consequences if she chose to become involved in Uyghur advocacy.<sup>18</sup>

Afterward, her father was demoted when the Xinjiang PSB accused him of “having contact and political discussions with Uyghurs in Australia.” Her mother was also dismissed from her position after discussing the events in Guangdong that preceded the Ürümchi incident of July 2009. After returning to visit them in 2010, the student was detained by security services who blindfolded her and took her to an undisclosed location to interrogate her about activist networks in Australia.<sup>19</sup> They questioned her for two days. Later, in 2011, she filed for asylum in Australia, which was granted after its Department of Immigration and Border Protection determined that she faced substantial risk if she ever returned to the PRC.

Uyghurs living in Europe had similar experiences in the early 2000s. In 2007, Germany’s Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) stated that it had reason to believe China’s government was surveilling Uyghur communities within its borders.<sup>20</sup> Soon after, Chinese Diplomat Ji Wumin was accused of passing on sensitive information about the Uyghur diaspora in Munich to Chinese intelligence.<sup>21</sup> China’s government attempted to reassign him to the post several years later, but the

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

German government blocked the appointment.<sup>22</sup> In a similar case reported in 2009, Barbur Mehsud was arrested by Swedish police for “unlawful acquisition and distribution of information relating to individuals for the benefit of a foreign power,” which he said he had given in exchange for obtaining financial benefits for his wife in the Uyghur region.<sup>23</sup> Police said Mehsud reported details of meetings held by the WUC both in Sweden and at WUC-organized summits in Washington DC to Chinese intelligence officers. Mehsud’s intermediaries were the Chinese Embassy press officer Zhou Lulu and Stockholm-based *People’s Daily* correspondent Lei Da. The latter had been demanding information on Uyghur activists, including about their health and finances.<sup>24</sup> After the case was launched, Zhou and Lei were expelled from Sweden, leading to China’s expulsion of a Swedish diplomat in retaliation.

The asylum application of Adil Hakimjan, one of the Uyghurs who had been held in Guantánamo, was a key motivator behind China’s surveillance operations in Europe around this time.<sup>25</sup> According to Mehsut’s confession, Chinese officials had expressed concern that Hakimjan’s case may set a precedent allowing other Uyghurs to settle in Sweden.<sup>26</sup> Germany exposed similar cases of Uyghur informants in Europe in 2011.<sup>27</sup>

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22 Hall and Jardine, “*Your Family Will Suffer*”: *How China is Hacking, Surveilling and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies*.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ritt Goldstein, “Freed From Guantanamo, A Uyghur Clings to Dream of Asylum in Sweden,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 24, 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2009/0424/p06s04-wogn.html>.

26 Goldstein, “Freed From Guantanamo, A Uyghur Clings to Dream of Asylum in Sweden.”

27 Ibid.

**FIGURE 21:** Adil Hakimjan's long journey from the XUAR to Sweden.  
Created by Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.



1. **November 1999:** Hakimjan flees the XUAR and attempts to settle in Kyrgyzstan.
2. **July 2001:** Facing deportation threats in Bishkek, Hakimjan plans to move to Turkey, stopping first in Pakistan and then in an Uyghur settlement in Afghanistan.
3. **December 2021:** Uyghur village in Afghanistan bombed by U.S. forces causing Hakimjan to flee into Pakistan where he is caught by bounty hunters.
4. **June 2002:** After being imprisoned, Hakimjan and 21 other captured Uyghurs are sent to Guantánamo.
5. **May 2006:** Hakimjan and four other Uyghurs are released from Guantánamo and are flown to Albania.
6. **November 2007:** Hakimjan files for political asylum in Sweden.

There was one case of an alleged terror attack in Europe that no doubt enhanced China's concerns at the time. In 2010, a Uyghur refugee was arrested in Norway for allegedly planning a terrorist attack for Al-Qaeda with two other men, an Uzbek and a Kurd.<sup>28</sup> The men planned to attack the office of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* after it printed cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>29</sup> The Uyghur suspect, Mikael Davud, has always denied this charge but admitted that he planned to attack the Chinese Embassy in Oslo.<sup>30</sup> In an interview with Davud conducted after he served his seven-year prison sentence, Sean Roberts says that the Uyghur continued to deny having had any contact with either Al-Qaeda or the TIP.<sup>31</sup> Davud was a "lone wolf" who planned his own attack motivated by a sense of injustice toward people.<sup>32</sup> It is important to emphasize that neither Al-Qaeda nor the TIP ever claimed involvement in this plan. Similar accusations were leveled against the TIP in Dubai at this time after two Uyghurs were arrested for an alleged plot to attack the Dragon Mall (see chapter four).<sup>33</sup> Much like the incident in Oslo, the TIP never claimed to be involved in the Dragon Mall plot and the Uyghurs arrested deny any links to Uyghur militants. At the time of publication, very few accusations have been made against TIP outside of China of orchestrating acts of terror. None have ever been substantiated.

China's overseas intelligence-gathering expanded drastically with the coming of the Uyghur region's mass internment program in 2017. With almost 1.8 million Uyghurs detained, the program offered China's security services ample opportunities to coerce Uyghurs living abroad by targeting their families. According to Halmurat Harri, a Uyghur activist living in Finland, his father was arrested in the XUAR after Harri protested his mother's arrest the year prior from Europe. Both of Harri's parents were

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28 "Norway Jails Two for Danish Newspaper Terror Plot," *BBC*, January 30, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16790916>.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Roberts, *War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, 125.

32 Ibid.

33 "Two Chinese Uyghurs Jailed for UAE Bomb Plot," *Reuters*, July 1, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-49801720100701>.

later released and placed under house arrest.<sup>34</sup> Other Uyghurs with Finnish citizenship have reported being photographed by Chinese intelligence while participating in protests. It is believed that such photographs can be used to identify participants and then target their families in the XUAR to coerce them into silence.<sup>35</sup> In France, a number of Uyghurs in recent years have reported receiving threatening messages from Xinjiang's PSB over WeChat, demanding home, school, and work addresses, together with photos, scans of ID cards, and French marriage certificates.<sup>36</sup> In 2019, French citizens Gulnazar (pseudonym) and Adili (pseudonym) reported being contacted by Chinese government officials seeking information about members of the Uyghur diaspora.<sup>37</sup> In order to hold a protest in Lisbon, Portugal, activists, and dissidents have to register with the city and hand over their personal information to the city. A June 2021, *Politico Europe* investigation found that the city of Lisbon's authorities had been sharing the personal information of dissidents and activists with repressive regimes worldwide, including China.<sup>38</sup> In place since 2011, this practice included the sharing of Uyghurs' data with the Chinese government. China's Party-state then went after the families of Uyghurs who had arranged protests in Lisbon, according to the local branch of Amnesty International.<sup>39</sup>

Starting in 2019, Abdurehim Ghani, a Uyghur living in the Netherlands has become a target of surveillance and intimidation by unknown indi-

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34 Xinrou Shu, "Heretic, separatist, traitor: Uyghur Halmurat Harri's Inbetween Life," *Supchina*, April 22, 2021, <https://supchina.com/2021/04/22/heretic-separatist-traitor-uyghur-activist-halmurat-harris-in-between-life/>.

35 Ellen Halliday, "Uighurs Can't Escape Chinese Repression, Even in Europe," *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/china-threatens-uighurs-europe/596347/>

36 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Chinese Police are Demanding Personal Information From Uyghurs in France," *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/02/chinese-police-are-secretly-demanding-personal-information-from-french-citizens-Uighurs-Xinjiang/>.

37 "How China Keeps a Close Eye on the Uyghur Diaspora in France," *France 24*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20191216-focus-how-china-keeps-a-grip-on-uighur-diaspora-in-france-surveillance-threats>.

38 Aitor Hernández-Morales, "Lisbon Has Shared Dissident Info with Repressive Regimes for Years," *Politico*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/lisbon-portugal-dissidents-personal-data-repressive-regimes/>.

39 Hernández-Morales, "Lisbon Has Shared Dissident Info with Repressive Regimes for Years."

viduals he believes to be connected to China's government. He has been photographed at various protests and threatened for his participation, as well as being harassed and receiving death threats over the phone.<sup>40</sup> Ghenni took action and informed Dutch police of these incidents. He was given a direct line to contact in the future if the intimidation continued.<sup>41</sup> Uyghurs in Belgium have also noted an uptick in harassment with many of them reporting calls from the Xinjiang PSB threatening their families in the Uyghur region. Some Uyghurs have also claimed that Chinese consular vehicles have been present at protests.<sup>42</sup>

Uyghur *imam* Abdujelil Emet, a German citizen who volunteers for the WUC, reported that harassment began for him in 2019. That year he received an unexpected call from his sister in the XUAR just two days after he had attended a Bundestag hearing on human rights.<sup>43</sup> Emet claimed that a Chinese official was also on the line and warned him that he should "think of his family" before he engages in any political activities abroad.<sup>44</sup>

A 2020 *VICE* report on Uyghurs in the UK revealed that the diaspora community there had concerns about espionage from within its ranks and decided to cancel their monthly gatherings. In the same investigation, *VICE* found that the majority of Uyghurs it had interviewed had developed PTSD, depression, and anxiety due to fears that the China state will punish their families living in the Uyghur region.<sup>45</sup> Some developed trauma after receiving text messages from the Xinjiang PSB warning them that they must register with their local police station in the XUAR or their family will suffer the consequences.

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40 Hall and Jardine, "Your Family Will Suffer": How China is Hacking, Surveilling and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies.

41 "Nowhere Feels Safe," Amnesty International, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2020/02/china-uyghurs-abroad-living-in-fear/>.

42 Halliday, "Uighurs Can't Escape Chinese Repression, Even in Europe."

43 Alice Su, "A Pakistani Father's Ordeal: China Seized His Uyghur Son and Sent His Daughter to An Orphanage," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-09-25/china-pakistan-uyghurs-xinjiang-silence>

44 Benjamin Haas, "'Think of Your Family': China threatens European citizens over Xinjiang protests," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/17/think-of-your-family-china-threatens-european-citizens-over-xinjiang-protests>.

45 Shayma Bakht, "China Is Spying on Uighur Muslims in the UK," *VICE News*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/akzww8/china-surveillance-uighur-muslims-uk>.

The number of Uyghurs living in the Asia-Pacific who have reported instances of transnational repression has dramatically increased after 2017. In 2018, Halmurat Rozi, a Uyghur graduate student studying in Japan, reported that his parents had been arrested in the Uyghur region shortly after they had traveled to visit him in Japan. He was then told not to contact them again, compelling him to raise awareness for Uyghurs through the Japan Uyghur Association.<sup>46</sup> In May 2020, XUAR PSB officials called to ask him whether he was connected with Rebiya Kadeer and attempted to recruit him to spy on his own organization. His brother was brought onto the call to encourage him. A few weeks later, Rozi received another call and decided to record it and send the footage to a local TV station to air.<sup>47</sup> To cut off representatives of the Xinjiang PSB, Rozi deleted the app they had used to call him, which also cut all contact with his family—this decision weighs heavily on him.<sup>48</sup>

Yusup (pseudonym) began receiving WeChat messages from a man who claimed to know one of his relatives in Xinjiang. This stranger said he was looking for advice on study abroad programs in Japan in May 2019. Within a few weeks, however, the man revealed himself to be an agent of the Xinjiang PSB. “If you can provide me with information on Uyghur activists, I can help [your relative],” he wrote.<sup>49</sup> The agent instructed Yusup to attend a Uyghur gathering in Tokyo and provide photographs of Erkin Sidick, a Uyghur international activist and engineer at NASA who planned to attend the event. When Yusup declined, the agent’s tone changed: “Your family will suffer. Remember that I am your friend, and I want to help you and your family.”<sup>50</sup>

The following months caused great strain on Yusup and his wife. “We didn’t want our families to suffer, but we also didn’t want to betray our people,” he told us. “My wife blamed me for all of it and said that I had placed

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46 Takamura Keiichi, “Backstories: Uighurs Abroad Still Feel Pressure,” *NHK*, July 28, 2020, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1222/>.

47 Takamura Keiichi, “Backstories: Uighurs Abroad Still Feel Pressure.”

48 Harakawa and Shimbun, “Chinese Abuse of Uyghurs Reaches Japan.”

49 Yusup (Uyghur diaspora member), online interview by Bradley Jardine, September 15, 2021, video.

50 Yusup, interview.

our families in great danger. It all weighed heavily on me.”<sup>51</sup> Through 2020, the agent asked Yusup to copy posts from social media sites concerning Uyghur activism in Tokyo. After initially fulfilling his requests, Yusup attempted to reject the work. Still, the agent instructed him to quit his job and said he would receive a monthly salary for his services to “national security” instead.<sup>52</sup> When Yusup refused to accept payment for copying the social media posts, the officer insisted that his family in the Uyghur region be paid on his behalf. Yusup again refused. A family member in the XUAR later messaged him on WeChat confirming receipt of payment from a Chinese security officer: “Remember that I am your friend. I am protecting your family.”<sup>53</sup> After that, the agent demanded Yusup begin to monitor individuals in Japan and began sending Yusup sensitive information, including information about a Japanese citizen. Most of the work involved translating blog posts by these individuals, noting their participation at protests, and who was sponsoring their activism. Yusup informed Japan’s intelligence community after China’s government began monitoring the Japanese citizen. Yusup expressed fears that he was being coerced into committing a criminal offense. Shortly thereafter, one of Yusup’s relatives sent a message denouncing him, which Yusup believes was obtained under duress.<sup>54</sup> Finally, after over two years of contact with the intelligence officer, Yusup shut down his WeChat account in February 2021. Without it, he cannot contact his family.<sup>55</sup>

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51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 XUAR authorities have filmed and publicly released many such “denouncements,” all of which appear to be produced under coercion and duress. For more on the phenomenon, see *“The Government Never Oppresses Us”: China’s proof-of-life Videos as Intimidation and a Violation of Uyghur Family Unity*, (Washington, D.C.: Uyghur Human Rights Project, February 2, 2021), <https://uhrp.org/report/the-government-never-oppresses-us-chinas-proof-of-life-videos-as-intimidation-and-a-violation-of-Uyghur-family-unity/>.

55 Yusup,.

## WELCOME TO THE MACHINE: GLOBALIZATION AND ALGORITHMIC SURVEILLANCE

On March 16, it was reported that a Uyghur had been detained by China's security services after one of his WeChat contacts shared a photo of themselves in Mecca, Saudi Arabia over social media.<sup>56</sup> Police feared that the Uyghur they detained may also have been there without a permit, a "crime" that could end in fifteen years behind bars. This anecdote shows the increasing danger Uyghurs face as Chinese tech companies spread worldwide and cooperate with the XUAR's surveillance regime.

In 2020, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping gave a series of speeches announcing his ambitions for the PRC. One, to achieve artificial intelligence (AI) supremacy by the end of the decade, received particular attention. In "the new space race," China has sought to turn itself into a global hub for AI innovation to rival leading research nations.<sup>57</sup> The CCP has established several partnerships with private companies and start-ups to achieve this goal and regularly recruits top computer scientists from the United States.<sup>58</sup> These goals may also serve to embolden China's security services, arming them with AI-powered algorithms that anticipate dissent and crime. This technology, combined with the hundreds of millions of cameras, allows the state to identify an individual and access their data in one of several police databases that contain detailed information, including DNA information, purchase history, family and friends, etc. In addition, computer algorithms will eventually be able to conduct "risk" assessments, assign people a status accordingly, and, if need be, target people for arrest before a crime is committed.<sup>59</sup> This effort to "predictively police" the population of China has profound implications for the Turkic peoples of the XUAR.

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56 Sarah Cook, "Worried About Huawei? Take a Closer Look at Tencent," *Japan Times*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/03/28/commentary/world-commentary/worried-huawei-take-closer-look-Tencent/>,

57 Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2020) 176.

58 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*, 167–213.

59 Ross Andersen, "The Panopticon is Already Here," *The Atlantic*, September 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197/>.

Facial recognition software and AI algorithms in use by China's government since 2018 claim to be able to identify "Uyghur" coded physical traits. In 2018, tech-giant Hikvision noted that facial recognition cameras on its website could identify gender as well.<sup>60</sup> Chinese company iFlytek boasted that it had used its voice-recognition technology to help "solve crimes" in the XUAR. This technology, according to the company, can "read" the Uyghur language. iFlytek is actively collaborating with China's government to build a database of voice and speech patterns.<sup>61</sup> Along with tech giant Huawei, some of these companies have become the target of U.S. sanctions based on their role in creating the surveillance state in the Uyghur region.<sup>62</sup> A 2021 *BBC* article reported that facial recognition technology designed to read "negative" or "anxious" emotions to "pre-judge" the subject has also been tested in detention centers in the Uyghur region.<sup>63</sup> This "automated affect recognition," is far from accurate in most cases, relying on the blanket categorization of emotions without consideration for social, cultural, and individual factors and nuances that impact facial expressions and expressions of emotion. A U.S. Transportation Security Administration program relying on similar technology to spot individuals "likely to commit terrorism" yielded no results.<sup>64</sup> This technology, based on pseudoscience, acts as yet another data point for the persecution of Uyghurs on often arbitrary grounds.

Many of the emerging technologies used to create this surveillance state are being sold to China by Western actors—in spite of legislation and blacklists meant to curtail those sales. A June 2021 *The New York Times* report revealed that two companies, Promega and Thermo Fisher have continued to sell DNA sequencing equipment to companies in China that then resell the equipment to the security services operating in the Uyghur region. While DNA collection is the norm for certain groups in China (e.g., in

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60 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*, 200.

61 *Ibid.*, 202–203.

62 *Ibid.*, 203.

63 Jane Wakefield, "AI Emotion-Detection Software Tested on Uyghurs," *BBC*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-57101248>.

64 Kate Crawford, "Artificial Intelligence is Misreading Human Emotion," *The Atlantic*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/04/artificial-intelligence-misreading-human-emotion/618696/>.

criminal cases, for migrant workers, etc.), this data collection is much more far-reaching, extending to nearly the entire population in the Uyghur region.<sup>65</sup> A 2017 program, called “Physicals for All” saw the mass collection of DNA and other physical information from millions of Uyghurs under the guise of a public health drive. All residents between the ages of 12 and 65 had to submit to giving blood samples, fingerprints, photos, and iris scans.<sup>66</sup> The technology sold to China’s government allows the Xinjiang PSB to collect and sequence thousands of unique blood samples collected by local police at checkpoints, prisons, and re-education camps all over the Uyghur region<sup>67</sup> and adds that information to databases used to surveil and track Uyghurs. This case is only the most recent series revealing how Western technology is being appropriated by China and exploited to commit human rights violations in the Uyghur region. This technology is also being used against Uyghurs overseas: in 2018, Ahmad Talip, a Uyghur living in Dubai, noted that during arbitrary imprisonment, local police forced him to provide a blood sample at the request of China’s government.<sup>68</sup>

Talip’s claim fits into a larger pattern: China’s government seeks to create an “ID card system,” for Uyghurs living abroad. Similar to the systems in the Uyghur region, this system requires detailed information on subjects and then uses that information as a tool to monitor Uyghur communities abroad. Party cadres have explicitly requested information to fill this dataset from those residing in the United States and elsewhere. In 2018, Barna (pseudonym) received an unusual request: a message from her mother, asking her to send over images of the license plate on her car. Soon, requests for her bank card number, her photo ID, and her phone number followed. This information was to be added to the database behind a new system of

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65 “China: Police DNA Database Threatens Privacy,” Human Rights Watch, May 15, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/15/china-police-dna-database-threatens-privacy>.

66 “China: Minority Region Collects Data From Millions,” Human Rights Watch, December 13, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/13/china-minority-region-collects-dna-millions>.

67 Su-Lee Wee, “China Still Buys American DNA Equipment for Xinjiang Despite Blocks,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/11/business/china-dna-xinjiang-american.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

68 Areeb Ullah, “Uyghur Speaks Out About Husband’s ‘Deportation’ From UAE,” *Middle East Eye*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uyghur-speaks-out-against-husbands-deportation-uae>.

Chinese state ID cards, that includes Uyghurs living abroad.<sup>69</sup> Barna chose to deny having an American bank account, but chose to send an image of her photo ID to her mother out of concern for her mother's safety; she understood from the tone of her messages that Chinese officials were coercing her.<sup>70</sup> Jevlan Shirmemmet (Jewlan Shirmemet), gave the *BBC* a recording of a call he had received a few weeks after he posted about the arrest of his family in the Uyghur region on social media. The caller, who said he was from the Chinese Embassy in Ankara, told Shirmemmet to "write down everyone you've been in contact with since you left Xinjiang," and to send an email "describing your activities," so that "the mainland might reconsider your family's situation." Mustafa Aksu, a Uyghur living in the U.S., showed the *BBC* messages from an old friend who had become a police officer. In these messages, his friend pressures Aksu to provide information on Uyghur activists in Turkey.<sup>71</sup>

The Chinese government's repressive practices have accelerated and internationalized dramatically since 2017, due to algorithmic surveillance. In the XUAR, police stations feed data into a powerful database: the IJOP (see introduction).<sup>72</sup> The IJOP categorizes individuals as "suspicious" on the basis of a number of criteria, including if they have any contact with anyone on the list of 26 blacklisted countries.<sup>73</sup> As a result, people who have visited or otherwise communicated with people in these countries have been interrogated, detained, or imprisoned in the XUAR. Increasingly, the borders of China's advanced surveillance system are blurring, with intelligence gathering and harassment on the rise worldwide.

New leaks of police datasets further suggest that Uyghurs in democracies are catching the security state's eye. In March 2021, the Shanghai Public Security Bureau was hacked. 1.1 million surveillance records were

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69 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Chinese Cops Now Spying on American Soil," *DailyBeast*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/chinese-police-are-spying-on-uyghurson-american-soil>.

70 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Chinese Cops Now Spying on American Soil."

71 Joel Gunter, "The Cost of Speaking Up Against China," *BBC*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56563449>.

72 "China's Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App."

73 "'Eradicating Ideological Viruses': China's Campaign of Mass Repression in Xinjiang."

leaked. Among these records was a database with the codename “Uyghur Terrorist.” This was part of an open-source database to which security agencies worldwide had access. The existence of this aggregated, shared information offers a glimpse into the massive scope of the Chinese government’s campaign against Uyghurs.<sup>74</sup> For many Uyghurs, such a charge came as a warning—an indication that they were subject to additional Chinese surveillance abroad. The “Uyghur Terrorist” database contains thousands of Uyghurs that have been detained, questioned, and monitored by the PSB. The inclusion of many of the “suspected terrorists” raises doubts as to its legitimacy as a “terrorist” database, given that more than 400 individuals were minors, some of whom were as young as five years old.<sup>75</sup> The database also included details about more than 5,000 foreigners who had traveled to Shanghai and flagged them for further monitoring. At least three Uyghur Australians were on the list, including three Australian citizens—Nurgul Sawut, Maimaitaji Kasimu, and a permanent resident whose mother was reportedly threatened with detention after he attended a protest. Several community leaders in Australia’s Uyghur communities have also been blacklisted as “terrorists.”<sup>76</sup>

## BEYOND THE GREAT FIREWALL: TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

In 2019, Nurgul Sawut discovered that a botnet had targeted her Facebook account. This swarm of fake accounts, one of which mimicked her own sister’s profile, attacked her with a public smear campaign and infected her computer with malware. Sawut has since protected herself by using encrypted email, disconnecting her Facebook account from any outside apps,

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74 Sean Rubinzstein-Dunlop and Echo Hui, “Australians Flagged in Shanghai Security Files Which Shed Light on China’s Surveillance State and Monitoring of Uyghurs,” *ABC*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-01/shanghai-files-shed-light-on-china-surveillance-state/100040896>.

75 Rubinzstein-Dunlop and Hui, “Australians Flagged in Shanghai Security Files Which Shed Light on China’s Surveillance State and Monitoring of Uyghurs.”

76 “Australian Uyghurs Say They’ve been Monitored and Threatened,” *MSN*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/en-au/lifestyle/lifestyle/royals/australian-uyghurs-say-theyve-been-monitored-and-threatened/vp-BB1fFzjr>.

and not downloading WeChat onto her device.<sup>77</sup> In retribution, the Xiniang PSB detained members of her family who were living in the Uyghur region.

In recent years, China's rising cyber capabilities have been gaining the attention of prominent Western officials and political commentators. In March 2021, Microsoft accused China's government of a "free-for-all" after hackers compromised the Microsoft Exchange email program, and used it to go after companies worldwide.<sup>78</sup> In July 2021, the United States government accused China's MSS of attacking and compromising more than 100,000 Microsoft Exchange servers worldwide in a separate hacking attempt.<sup>79</sup> There have also been several high-profile hacking campaigns linked to the PLA over the past decade, that include the use of malware and spyware.<sup>80</sup> In addition to state actors, China's hacking ecosystem more broadly appears to be expanding. According to 2018 Internet Development Statistics, China's cybercriminal underground was worth more than \$15 billion USD, nearly twice the size of its information security industry. In addition, China's cybercrime has grown at a rate of 30 percent per annum, comprising an estimated 400,000 individuals linked to cybercriminal networks.<sup>81</sup> These cybercriminal networks often feed into state power. For example, since 2012, it has been reported that a Chinese hacking group that conducts operations for China's government has also been accused of independent criminal activities. In its 2019 report, FireEye said the hacking group APT41 was different from other China-based

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77 Josh Taylor, "I Can't Be That Careless': Australian Uyghur Activist Targeted Online," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/16/i-cant-be-that-careless-australian-uyghur-activist-targeted-online>.

78 Kevin Collier, "China Behind Another Hack as U.S. Cybersecurity Issues Mount," *NBC*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/china-another-hack-us-cybersecurity-issues-mount-rcna744>.

79 John Hudson and Ellen Nakashima, "US Allies Accuse China of Hacking Microsoft and Condoning Other Attacks," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/microsoft-hack-china-biden-nato/2021/07/19/a90ac7b4-e827-11eb-84a2-d93bc0b50294\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/microsoft-hack-china-biden-nato/2021/07/19/a90ac7b4-e827-11eb-84a2-d93bc0b50294_story.html).

80 Nicole Perloth, Kate Conger, Paul Mozur, "China Sharpens Hacking to Hound its Minorities, Far and Wide," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/technology/china-hackers-ethnic-minorities.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

81 Allen Bernard, "Chinese Cybersecurity Criminals are Getting More Organized and Dangerous," *TechRepublic*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/chinese-cyber-criminals-are-getting-more-organized-and-dangerous/>.

groups due to its access to malware used by China's security services which APT41 used to hack video game companies for profit.<sup>82</sup>

Human rights groups and journalists have also seen themselves targeted by such groups. Chinese spyware campaigns have expanded beyond China's borders and toward Washington, D.C.-based think tanks, government agencies, human rights groups, and law firms.<sup>83</sup> Government denial is often plausible due to the lack of sophistication among targeted entities regarding cybersecurity, not to mention the growing number of patriotic hackers who engage in mischief without state encouragement. Uyghur advocacy groups remain especially exposed. The WUC, in particular, has been subject to DDoS attacks and constant phishing emails sent to staffers with vicious malware. Muhemmedeli Niyaz, web developer at WUC since 2016, spoke with me about his work securing the organization's website. "The main attacks are DDoS, and these usually occur when we host important events or release reports. The website will not open on those days, and we need to work around the clock to keep it online. We have had our Uyghur language YouTube channel hacked to remove content, as well as our organization's Twitter account."<sup>84</sup> The WUC also faces phishing attacks. Niyaz notes that "these activities place substantial financial burdens on WUC." Two WUC volunteers reported receiving 1,493 suspicious emails over four years. Of those, 1,116 contained malware attachments.<sup>85</sup>

Increasingly, individual Uyghurs, even those not politically active, are being attacked worldwide. China's government has targeted individuals online through social media and hacking campaigns and exploited backdoors

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82 Josh Taylor, "Chinese Cyber hackers 'Blurring Boundary Between State Power and Crime,'" *The Guardian*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/aug/08/chinese-cyberhackers-blurring-line-between-state-power-and>.

83 Andrea Peterson, "Chinese Cyberspies Have Hacked Middle East Experts at Major U.S. Think Tanks," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2014/07/07/chinese-cyberspies-have-hacked-middle-east-experts-at-major-u-s-think-tanks/>.

84 Muhammedeli Niyaz (web developer at WUC), online interview by Bradley Jardine, July 16, 2021, audio.

85 Stevens Le Blond, Adina Uritesc, Cédric Gilbert, Zheng Leong Chua, Prateek Saxena, and Engin Kirda, "A Look at Targeted Attacks through the Lense of an NGO," *23rd USENIX Security Symposium*, San Diego, CA, August 20–22, 2014, <https://www.usenix.org/conference/usenixsecurity14/technical-sessions/presentation/le-blond>

in smartphone software through malware to collect data and surveil them. Although it is difficult to attribute these attacks to the Chinese state directly, their targets suggest they serve government interests. Cybersecurity group Palo Alto Networks identified a group called “Scarlet Mimic,” which used spear-phishing and watering hole attacks to gain access to activists’ computers via malware dubbed “FakeM.”<sup>86</sup> They also found evidence to indicate the group “targets individuals working inside U.S. government anti-terrorist organizations. We suspect these targets are selected based on their access to information about the targeted minority groups.”<sup>87</sup> Compromising the communications of dissidents and human rights groups can put those who remain in China at risk. After his Yahoo account was attacked in 2010, Dilshat Raxit reported being unable to communicate with contacts in the Uyghur region. Private companies can contribute to this problem by failing to alert customers about data breaches. For example, in 2015, Microsoft employees revealed that the company had decided not to tell the hackers’ targets, many of them Uyghurs, that their email accounts had been compromised.<sup>88</sup>

In 2019, cybersecurity firm Volexity discovered that 11 Uyghur websites were compromised. These websites, including Uyghur Academy, *Turkistan Times*, *Uighur Times* (in English, Mandarin, and Uyghur), and East Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association, were outside the Great Firewall (i.e. on the open internet), leaving only Uyghurs living abroad to access them. Volexity also revealed that hackers had created “doppelganger domains” for real websites, including Google, fake applications, and plug-ins that they used to steal emails and contact information.<sup>89</sup> In 2021, Facebook revealed that Chinese hackers from a group called Evil Eye had infiltrated Uyghur groups on its platform using fake accounts. The group spent months gaining trust within the community before sharing links to

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86 *The Fifth Poison: The Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas.*

87 Ibid.

88 Joseph Menn, “Microsoft Failed to Warn Victims of Chinese Email Hack: Former Employees,” *Reuters*, December 30, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-microsoft-china-insight/microsoft-failed-to-warn-victims-of-chinese-email-hack-former-employees-idUSKBN0UE01Z20151231>.

89 Andrew Case, Matthew Meltzer, and Stephen Adair, “Digital Crackdown: Large-Scale Surveillance and Exploitation of Uyghurs,” *Volexity*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.volexity.com/blog/2019/09/02/digital-crackdown-large-scale-surveillance-and-exploitation-of-uyghurs/>

corrupted sites hosting malware. The attack was targeted, impacting just under 500 Uyghurs from Turkey, Kazakhstan, the U.S., Australia, Canada, and Syria. In response, Facebook removed the group of hackers from the website and blocked all corrupted and fake domains.<sup>90</sup> However, Facebook continued to allow China to run advertisements on its platform denying the existence of mass atrocities in the XUAR.<sup>91</sup>

In May 2021, cybersecurity experts uncovered a plot targeting Uyghurs in Pakistan. Hackers set up a fake website for a human rights foundation called the “Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation,” which tricked people into installing a backdoor to the Windows software running on their computers and gave hackers access to their data. This same group also sent malicious documents to Uyghurs by email falsely using the names and logos of the UN and UNHCR.<sup>92</sup> Additional evidence suggests that Uyghurs living in Pakistan and the Uyghur region were the primary targets, with the same operations directed at Uyghurs living in Turkey and Malaysia. According to researchers, these phishing attempts continue as of their reporting.<sup>93</sup>

In past research projects, I have surveyed Uyghurs who have overwhelmingly revealed they feel unsafe online. Of the 72 Uyghurs I surveyed in North America, Japan, Australia, and Europe in October 2021, 95.8 percent said that they felt they faced unique threats online.<sup>94</sup> Some three-

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90 Elizabeth Culliford and Raphael Satter, “Chinese Hackers Used Facebook to Target Uyghurs Abroad, Company Says,” *Reuters*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-china-cyber/chinese-hackers-used-facebook-to-target-uyghurs-abroad-company-says-idUSKBN2BG2UU>.

91 Isobel Asher Hamilton, “Facebook is Letting China Run State Ads Denying the Abuse of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, and Staffers are Reportedly Raising Concerns Internally,” *Business Insider*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-internal-tension-china-xinjiang-ads-adverts-uyghurs-2021-4>.

92 Shoshanna Soloman, “Israel-based Cybersecurity Experts Expose Ongoing Hack Attack on Uyghurs,” *Times of Israel*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-based-cybersecurity-experts-expose-ongoing-hack-attacks-on-uyghurs/>.

93 Tim Starks, “Possible Chinese Hackers Pose as UN, Human Rights Group to Eavesdrop on Beleaguered Uyghur Population,” *CyberScoop*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.cyberscoop.com/uyghur-chinese-hackers-pakistan-check-point-kaspersky/>; “Fake Human Rights Documents and Websites Used in Cyber Attack,” *CheckPoint Research*, May 27, 2017, <https://research.checkpoint.com/2021/uyghurs-a-Turkic-ethnic-minority-in-china-targeted-via-fake-foundations/>.

94 See Natalie Hall and Bradley Jardine “‘Your Family Will Suffer’: How China is Hacking, Surveiling, and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies,” Uyghur Human Rights

quarters of respondents said they had experienced some form of attack or use of spyware against them. Perhaps most alarmingly, only a third of respondents said they knew who to turn to for security advice.

The government of China is also waging war on free speech across much of the democratic world. In 2019, Columbia University canceled an event titled “Panopticism with Chinese Characteristics” after a Chinese student group threatened to protest outside the building where the event would be held.<sup>95</sup> On February 11, 2019, Rukiye Turdush spoke at an event sponsored by two Muslim student groups at McMaster University in Ontario. Han Chinese students organized on WeChat and were upset that a dissident and “separatist” was allowed to speak on campus—a move some felt was an insult to them personally and their nationalist sensibilities. Students reached out to the Chinese consulate in Toronto before the event and prepared to record and disrupt the event. As Turdush presented, a student filmed the event, later shouting and storming out; other students verbally insulted Turdush during the discussion.<sup>96</sup> Others took pictures that were sent to Chinese officials. Student groups, including the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) on campus, then signed a bulletin about Turdush’s talk, slamming the university for allowing such an event to be held on campus. Turdush found the experience to be unnerving and expressed concern for academic freedoms on campuses.<sup>97</sup> Months later, in September 2019, the CSSA was removed from McMaster’s campus over concerns that it was reporting on fellow students to

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Project and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, November 10, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/your-family-will-suffer-how-china-is-hacking-surveilling-and-intimidating-uyghurs-in-liberal-democracies/>

95 Lin Yang, “China-Sensitive Topics at US Universities Draw More Online Harassment,”

*Voice of America*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/china-sensitive-topics-us-universities-draw-more-online-harassment>; Teng Biao, Rose Tang, Dorjee Tseten, et.al., “Free Speech in American Universities Under Attack from Beijing,” *Voice of America*, November 15, 2019, <https://studentsforafreetibet.org/free-speech-in-american-universities-under-attack-from-beijing/>.

96 Adam Carter, “Activist Accuses Chinese Government of Meddling After McMaster Speech Disrupted,” *CBC*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/mcmaster-university-china-1.5021406>.

97 Garry Shih and Emily Rauhala, “Angry Over Campus Speech by Uighur Activist, Chinese Students in Canada Contact Their Consulate, Film Presentation,” *Washington Post*, February 14, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/angry-over-campus-speech-by-uighur-activist-students-in-canada-contact-chinese-consulate-film-presentation/2019/02/14/a442fbc4-306d-11e9-ac6c-14eea99d5e24\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/angry-over-campus-speech-by-uighur-activist-students-in-canada-contact-chinese-consulate-film-presentation/2019/02/14/a442fbc4-306d-11e9-ac6c-14eea99d5e24_story.html).

the Chinese Embassy.<sup>98</sup> Later in 2019, Chinese consular officials pressured Concordia University and the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies to cancel a planned event with Dolkun Isa. Event organizers went ahead with the talk, citing concerns over freedom of speech and the ability of academia to discuss relevant current issues.<sup>99</sup> While events on the XUAR have been disrupted in many countries worldwide, the coordination of students with Chinese officials on Canadian soil presents a particularly concerning example of the Chinese government's reach overseas.

China's Party-state has also targeted Uyghur journalists who report on the human rights violations in the XUAR, hunting their family members and relatives who still live in the Uyghur region. Gulchera Hoja, Kurban Niyaz, Mamatjan Juma, Shohret Hoshur, and Eset Sulaiman report for *Radio Free Asia* covering the XUAR. Because of their work at *RFA* they have frequently faced harassment and intimidation, including threats to family members still living in the XUAR. These threats were realized when China's government demanded that these family members and relatives stop sharing information about events in the XUAR and imprisoned family members and relatives of each of the reporters—sometimes on more than one occasion.<sup>100</sup> Gulchera Hoja, who emigrated to the U.S. in 2001 to work for *RFA*, discovered in an April 2021 press conference held by China's government that she and her 81-year-old father, Abduqueyem Hoja, had been placed on a terrorist list in 2017.<sup>101</sup> Her father is one of 25 family members and relatives that China's government has detained.<sup>102</sup> Hasanjan, the younger brother of Kurban Niyaz

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98 Yojana Sharma, "Student Group With Links to Beijing Banned from McMaster," *University World News*, October 4, 2019, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20191003231559963>.

99 Leon Sevunts, "Chinese Officials Pressured Canadian University to Cancel Event With Uighur Activist," *Radio Canada International*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2019/03/27/chinese-officials-pressured-canadian-university-to-cancel-event-with-uighur-activist/>.

100 Austin Ramzy, "After U.S.-Based Reporters Exposed Abuses, China Seized Their Relatives," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/world/asia/china-xinjiang-rfa.html>.

101 "China Detains Relatives of U.S. Reporters in Apparent Punishment for Xinjiang Coverage," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-detains-relatives-of-us-reporters-in-apparent-punishment-for-xinjiang-coverage/2018/02/27/4e8d84ae-1b8c-11e8-8a2c-1a6665f59e95\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-detains-relatives-of-us-reporters-in-apparent-punishment-for-xinjiang-coverage/2018/02/27/4e8d84ae-1b8c-11e8-8a2c-1a6665f59e95_story.html)

102 Fred Hiatt, "China is Intensifying the Third Phase of its Genocide Denial," *Washington*

was sentenced to six years in prison in 2017 after being accused of “harboring feelings of ethnic hatred.” In May that same year, two of Mamatjan Juma’s brothers were detained. Shohret Hoshur’s three brothers, meanwhile, were all re-detained in 2017 after they had each served sentences over the previous three years. Hoshur has alleged that China’s government has a voice recognition system that automatically cuts off his calls when he tries to connect with family in the Uyghur region.<sup>103</sup> At the time of publication, more than 50 relatives of *RFA* staffers in the XUAR have been reported as imprisoned.<sup>104</sup>

The proliferation of modern communications technology has lowered the bar for China to engage in transnational repression in democracies, further closing the space for Uyghurs to advocate for their rights. Combined with growing renditions and detentions around the world, Uyghurs are increasingly isolated and vulnerable.

Uyghurs in liberal democracies no longer feel safe and many have been hindered in exercising their democratic rights. As this chapter has shown, China’s Party-state employs broad use of “every day” tactics to pursue Uyghurs, including digital threats, phishing attacks, passport restrictions, malware, and coercion via people’s relatives in the XUAR. I have recorded 5,532 such instances of state targeting to intimidate Uyghurs into silence. Modern communications technology has given governments like China’s unprecedented, low-cost means of gathering intelligence on diaspora communities and pursuing perceived dissidents in states where China has been unable to detain or extradite ethnic minorities. These methods, paired with the systematic denial of passport renewals, have left Uyghurs marginalized and vulnerable to more coercive forms of repression.

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*Post*, April 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/18/uyghurs-china-radio-free-asia/>; Jessica Blatt, “How Chinese Uses Family Members to Pressure Uyghur Journalists,” *Voice of America*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/how-china-uses-family-members-pressure-uyghur-journalist>

103 Simon Denyer, “China Detains Relatives of U.S. Reporters in Apparent Punishment for Xinjiang Coverage,” *Washington Post*, February 27, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-detains-relatives-of-us-reporters-in-apparent-punishment-for-xinjiang-coverage/2018/02/27/4e8d84ae-1b8c-11e8-8a2c-1a6665f59e95\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-detains-relatives-of-us-reporters-in-apparent-punishment-for-xinjiang-coverage/2018/02/27/4e8d84ae-1b8c-11e8-8a2c-1a6665f59e95_story.html); Fred Hiatt, “China is Intensifying the Third Phase of its Genocide Denial.”

104 Shohret Hoshur, “Brothers of RFA Journalist Confirmed Detained by Xinjiang Authorities,” *Radio Free Asia*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/brothers-03032021193155.html>

## EPILOGUE

# No Safe Haven

**IN ISTANBUL'S BUSTLING** Zeytinburnu district, once welcoming Uyghur restaurants now have signs reading “Chinese, do not enter.” Owners say conversation breaks into hushed tones when a stranger enters the room. These are not displays of rising xenophobia, however, but of fear. According to locals, several Han Chinese individuals have been entering the neighborhood and photographing members of the Uyghur diaspora. Sensational reports of intra-community spying have also increased the locals’ sense of alarm. The most prominent of these involved Yusupjan Amet,<sup>1</sup> a Uyghur living in Istanbul who went public in 2019 to declare that he had been working as a Chinese spy since 2012, informing on Uyghur diaspora communities in Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> According to Amet’s own testimony, his activities—which he claims were motivated by government threats against his family in the XUAR—directly contributed to the imprisonment and refolement of Uyghurs.<sup>3</sup> He was shot by unknown assailants outside

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- 1 Amet also claimed to have been sent to these countries to pose as someone interested in joining terrorist groups so he could infiltrate “cells.” He was reportedly sent to Afghanistan to join a militia connected to the Taliban. Yusupjan said Chinese intelligence was convinced Uyghur communities overseas were plotting to attack BRI infrastructure. This matches a pattern of accusations of increasingly elaborate Chinese intelligence operations in recent years. In December 2020, Indian media reported that Afghanistan’s intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, had arrested 10 Chinese nationals for allegedly trying to build an artificial Uyghur militant cell to attract militants in Afghanistan and have them arrested. See “Afghanistan Arrests 10 Chinese Citizens on Charges of Espionage, asks China to Apologise,” *Opindia*, December 25, 2020, <https://www.opindia.com/2020/12/afghanistan-arrests-10-chinese-citizens-charges-of-espionage-apologise/>.
  - 2 Shohret Hoshur, “Self-Proclaimed Uyghur Former Chinese Spy Shot by Unknown Assailant in Turkey,” *Radio Free Asia*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/spy-11032020175523.html>
  - 3 Hoshur, “Self-Proclaimed Uyghur Former Chinese Spy Shot by Unknown Assailant in Turkey.”

his friend's apartment in Istanbul just under a year after he spoke with international media.

Turkey has acted as a reliable sanctuary for the many thousands of Uyghurs who have fled China's persecution in their homeland for decades. The districts of Zeytburnu and Sefakoy have been thriving hubs of Uyghur exile culture since the 1950's when high-profile leaders of the collapsed second East Turkestan Republic set up a new base there for their international movement. There are currently 50,000 Uyghurs residing in Turkey, making it the largest Uyghur community outside of Central Asia. The Turkish government has long been a vocal supporter of Uyghur rights and has often voiced opposition to China's policies. In 2009, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called China's crackdown in the aftermath of the unrest in Ürümqi that year "an act of genocide."<sup>4</sup>

That flame has begun to dim and the embattled Uyghurs have found themselves enveloped in darkness. Over the past six years, Erdogan's tone has shifted markedly. While the Turkish leader reiterated that his country's doors would remain open to Uyghur refugees in 2015, he has since become less vocal in championing their cause. Following a number of high-profile BRI meetings with members of the Chinese business community, Turkey has moved closer to Beijing politically.<sup>5</sup> This is also, in part, a question of regime survival. Ankara is a much more isolated actor than it was in the past, having alienated its Western allies in 2016 by ruthlessly cracking down on its political opposition. But in the end, the need for money and friends has caused Turkey to abandon the Uyghurs. The reality may be harsher yet.

In recent years, Ankara has closed off political space to its historically vocal Uyghur diaspora. In January 2021, police banned Uyghur gatherings, citing Covid-19 concerns, after many had protested for months outside the Chinese consulate in Istanbul to demand information on the whereabouts of disappeared family members in the XUAR. Another group of protesters in the Turkish capital were detained immediately after the Chinese

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4 "Turkish Leader Calls Xinjiang Killings 'Genocide,'" *Reuters*, July 10, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-china-sb-idUSTRE56957D20090710>.

5 Nicholas Muller, "Are the Uyghurs Safe in Turkey?" *The Diplomat*, February 13, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/are-the-uyghurs-safe-in-turkey/>

Embassy accused them of spreading fake news.<sup>6</sup> These were likely politically motivated decisions. Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu has issued a number of pro-Beijing comments in recent years, warning Uyghur protesters to stop spreading American propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

Increasingly, China's security services are operating in Turkey practically unopposed. In February 2020, Jevlan Shirmemmet, a Uyghur living in Istanbul, had been campaigning for information about his mother's whereabouts in the XUAR when he received a call from the Chinese Embassy in Ankara saying she had been arrested for allegedly "aiding terrorists."<sup>8</sup> Four months later, Shirmemmet received another unexpected call from his father back home in the XUAR telling him to stop his activism. He received similar calls from his uncle and younger brother.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to its weakening rhetorical support for the Uyghur cause, Turkey has proven complicit in their arrest and harassment. My research indicates that Turkey has detained a growing number of people since the Chinese government declared its "People's War on Terror" in 2014. In October 2016, Turkey imprisoned prominent Uyghur activist Abduqadir Yapchan, allegedly at the behest of China's government. The 58-year-old Muslim religious teacher was born in Qāshqār but had lived in Turkey since 2002.<sup>10</sup> In 2003, China's Party-state placed Yapchan on its first "terrorist list," accusing him of having connections to ETIM. He was detained despite a Turkish court acquitting him of charges relating to terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Other Uyghurs say Turkey's anti-terror forces have been visiting Uyghur

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6 Asim Kashgarian and Ezel Sahinkaya, "Turkey Cracks Down on Uyghur Protesters After China Complains," *Voice of America*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/turkey-cracks-down-Uyghur-protesters-after-china-complains>.

7 "Four Uyghurs Facing Persecution After Deportation by Saudi Arabia to China, Identified," *Radio Free Asia*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deportation-10162020150910.html#>.

8 "Interview: 'By Forcing My Father to Call Me, They're Trying to Warn Me to be Quiet,'" *Radio Free Asia*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/coerced-06082020172854.html>.

9 "Interview: 'By Forcing My Father to Call Me, They're Trying to Warn Me to be Quiet.'"

10 "Exiled Leader Claims China is Behind Turkey's Decision to Detain a Uyghur Activist," *Radio Free Asia*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/exiled-leader-claims-china-10102016155133.html>

11 "Exiled Leader Claims China is Behind Turkey's Decision to Detain a Uyghur Activist."

neighborhoods and questioning community members about whether they have participated in anti-China movements.<sup>12</sup> Many also report being detained by these same forces.

The scale is likely far more significant than my dataset suggests if bulk detentions are taken into account. In March 2020, *National Public Radio* reported that up to 400 Uyghurs had been detained by Turkey's security services the previous year alone.<sup>13</sup> There have also been reports of Turkey working through third countries to deport Uyghurs back to China. In August 2019, Ankara deported a Uyghur woman and her two children to Tajikistan, from where the family was subsequently deported to China.<sup>14</sup> The same report claimed that five or six other Uyghurs had been aboard the same flight.<sup>15</sup>

New information suggests China's Ministry of Justice has been issuing orders to its Turkish counterparts to seize Uyghurs. In May 2020, American news outlet *Axios* received a classified 2016 Chinese extradition request issued to Turkey. The document requested that Istanbul hand over a Uyghur cell phone vendor Beijing accused of promoting IS propaganda online. The vendor was arrested but eventually released and cleared of charges.<sup>16</sup>

Turkey's complicity in China's transnational repression fits with the global trends documented in this study. Since 2017, 726 Uyghurs have been detained in or forcibly returned from Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, the UAE, and Uzbekistan—all of which appear in a Chinese police database that blacklists "suspicious countries" with

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- 12 Dake Kang and Suzan Fraser, "Turkey Uyghurs Fear Sellout to China in Exchange for Vaccine," *Associated Press*, February 5, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-beijing-coronavirus-pandemic-ankara-china-c8b714974552c484c501a5784efc117a>
- 13 "I Thought I Would be Safe: Uyghurs in Turkey Now Fear China's Long Arm," *National Public Radio*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/13/800118582/i-thought-it-would-be-safe-uyghurs-in-turkey-now-fear-china-s-long-arm>.
- 14 "Uyghur Mother, Daughters Deported to China From Turkey."
- 15 Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan Accused Of Helping China In Campaign Against Uyghurs," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/31309627.html>.
- 16 Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Exclusive: Documents Show China's Secret Extradition Request for Uyghur in Turkey," *Axios*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/documents-chinas-secret-extradition-request-Uyghur-turkey-6d5ba886-c22c-47e8-b970-804fae274e2d.html>.

sizable Uyghur populations.<sup>17</sup> This IJOP also flags Uyghurs and their families for arbitrary detention in the XUAR for maintaining contact with relatives or friends residing within these target countries.<sup>18</sup> As a result, Uyghurs who have their communication monitored by the Chinese state face various threats, including refoulement while traveling in third countries or arrest and harassment of family members living in China.<sup>19</sup> In 2018, a Uyghur woman living in Turkey named Dilbar Asat reported that police arrested her relatives in China after they communicated with her for “too long.”<sup>20</sup> Dilbar had gone to great lengths to protect her family in China, suggesting that they delete her Turkish contact information on their phones. China’s government detained them regardless.

It is not just stateless Uyghurs residing within Turkey who are at risk. Turkish citizens have faced restrictions on their freedom of movement and active surveillance from the Chinese police. According to the “China Cables” (leaked in 2019), Chinese security services kept track of about 1,535 people from the Uyghur region who had citizenship from various foreign nations, with about 75 confirmed to be in China and about 560 whose location was undetermined.<sup>21</sup> Of the 75 “red-flagged” people, 26 were Turkish. The documents stated that: “Personal identification verification should be inspected one by one, for those who have already canceled their [Chinese] citizenship and for whom suspected terrorism cannot be ruled out, they should be deported. For those who haven’t canceled their citizenship yet and for whom suspected terrorism cannot be ruled out, they should first be placed into concentrated education and training and examined.”<sup>22</sup>

There have been numerous reported cases of Turkish citizens detained by the Xinjiang PSB in the Uyghur region since the start of the mass

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17 Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

18 Ibid.

19 Nazish Dholakia and Maya Wang, “Interview: China’s Crackdown on Turkic Muslims,” Human Rights Watch, September 9, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/09/interview-chinas-crackdown-turkic-muslims>.

20 “Xinjiang Authorities Jail Family Members of Two Uyghurs in Exile For Travel, Overseas Ties,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/overseas-08282020164436.html>.

21 “China Cables,” International Consortium of Independent Journalists, 2021, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/>.

22 “China Cables.”

internment program in 2017.<sup>23</sup> In September of that year, married couple Yahya and Amine Kurban were detained outside their store in Ürümchi.<sup>24</sup> When their daughter Hankiz alerted the Turkish government to their case she was told simply that many Turkish people were in the same situation and that they were “looking into the matter with Chinese authorities.”<sup>25</sup> As mass internment has intensified, Turkey has also clamped down on domestic media coverage on mass atrocities in the Uyghur region. During an official visit to Beijing in August 2017, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu promised “We’ll regard China’s security as our own security. We’ll never allow any activities that threaten China’s sovereignty and security on our territory or the region we are in. We’ll eliminate any media reporting targeting China.”<sup>26</sup>

Many Uyghurs are beginning to fear for their future in Turkey. The community has repeatedly expressed its concern over a controversial extradition treaty signed by Erdoğan in 2017 that has been awaiting ratification. The bill received renewed attention in December 2020 after China’s government suddenly ratified the agreement. It has yet to be approved by the Turkish parliament, however.<sup>27</sup> But many fear the worst and have already chosen to leave. This includes Serikzhan Bilash, the Kazakh activist who documented China’s atrocities in the Uyghur region. His family fled Kazakhstan for Turkey in September 2020 after receiving multiple threats from the government of Kazakhstan and have since resettled in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Since the 1990s, China has pushed the Uyghur diaspora further and further west. From Central Asia to South Asia and the MENA, to Turkey. Now, the community turns to Europe and North America for hope. But

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23 Ibid.

24 “Xinjiang Authorities Detain Uyghur Turkish Nationals Who ‘Witnessed Government Crimes’: Daughter,” *Radio Free Asia*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/couple-04302021171012.html>.

25 “Xinjiang Authorities Detain Uyghur Turkish Nationals Who ‘Witnessed Government Crimes.’”

26 “Turkish Foreign Ministry: China’s Security is Our Security,” CGTN, August 3, 2017, [https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d557a4d7745544e/share\\_p.html](https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d557a4d7745544e/share_p.html).

27 Daren Butler, “Looming China extradition deal worries Uyghurs in Turkey,” *Reuters*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/womens-day-Uyghur-turkey-int/looming-china-extradition-deal-worries-Uyghurs-in-turkey-idUSKBN2B01E2>.

28 Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China’s Transnational Repression of Uyghurs*.

even here, in the heart of liberal democracy, Uyghurs feel afraid. They are reporting online abuse, threats against their families, and harassment in record numbers.<sup>29</sup> Several I have interviewed suffer from “night terrors,” causing them to scream and flail in their sleep. For its sufferers, dreams are no longer a space of refuge. On one occasion I awoke at 4 a.m. to a text from a Uyghur friend: “In your report, please consider adding that almost every Uyghur living in the diaspora I have spoken with has been having a similar dream. We return to our homeland only to be interrogated by police. We know it’s a dream only because we are too afraid to ever go back home. It is like a form of magic to wield such power over an entire people. The fear is borderless. Sorry to bother you with this.”

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29 “A Daily Cloud of Suffering: A Crackdown in China is Felt Abroad,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/06/world/asia/uyghur-mental-health-china.html>.

# Conclusion

**CHINA'S PERSECUTION OF** the Uyghur region's Turkic inhabitants is global in scale. Through intimidation, harassment, surveillance, detentions, extraditions, and renditions, China's government seeks to break the will of Uyghur activists and stifle dissent. As this study reveals, China's transnational dragnet has been cast since 1997 and has been spreading ever wider since. From its first decade (1997–2007), China's security services hunted Uyghurs across nine countries and used foreign partners to physically detain or deport at least 84 people. This grew in the five years immediately following the 2008 Beijing Olympics (2008–2013) when the international dragnet claimed 126 Uyghurs and Turkic minorities living in 13 countries. It is in the final ongoing phase that transnational repression has reached an unprecedented intensity. The People's War on Terror (2014–present) has been a watershed for China's transnational repression. Since its declaration, the campaign has resulted in at least 1,364 Uyghurs being either detained in or deported from 18 countries. These figures, like the rest of the figures in this study, are public and therefore just the tip of the iceberg. It is highly likely that a more significant number remains unreported.

The study has also revealed the ways in which internal factors have often driven or at least influenced key foreign policy decisions by China.<sup>1</sup> A significant argument advanced throughout this report is that China pursues a domestically-oriented foreign policy. Early security engagements in Central and South Asia were, in part, a response to Uyghur refugee outflows following the unrest in Baren (1990) and Ghulja (1997). These efforts were redoubled in the aftermath of inter-ethnic violence in Ürümchi in 2009, which caused 30,000 Uyghurs to flee China. The declaration of the "People's War on Terror" in the

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1 For another study on this phenomenon see Michael Clarke "The Impact of Ethnic Minorities on China's Foreign Policy: The Case of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs," *China Report*, February 19, 2017, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0009445516677361>

aftermath of the 2014 Kunming Attack sparked the most severe escalation in China's efforts to intimidate the international Uyghur community. Since then, China's security services have turned their attention to Turkey, and the MENA region. China's transnational repression, therefore, mirrors a growing internationalization of the Uyghur issue. Since 2017, the international backlash against China's mass incarceration program has resulted in a widespread campaign by China's Party-state to control the historical and current narrative on the Uyghur region. The CCP has deployed spyware, malware, botnets, DDoS attacks, and other modern digital techniques to intimidate and surveil Uyghurs residing in the liberal democratic world who have dared to speak out against Beijing's crimes against humanity.

My research records 5,532 cases of China's government targeting Uyghurs abroad using stage 1 intimidation and harassment. These efforts act as an extension of China's surveillance regime within the XUAR and directly infringe upon the rights of Uyghurs living abroad by denying them the right to free speech and assembly—values enshrined in democratic constitutions worldwide. There is also much evidence that China's crackdown on free speech and surveillance is turning to foreign scholars and researchers who have been working to draw attention to the Uyghur region's humanitarian crisis. According to a recent investigation by the *Washington Post*, China's government agencies have issued contracts and bids to mine Western social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to equip its government agencies, military, and police with information on foreign targets.<sup>2</sup> This information-gathering is part of a wider drive by Beijing to make its foreign propaganda more appealing.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the Uyghur region, China's government has already been co-opting fringe Western news outlets to refine its denial of the humanitarian crisis to international audiences on social media platforms such as Twitter.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 Cate Cadell, "China Harvests Masses of Data on Western Targets, Documents Show," *Washington Post*, December 31, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-harvests-masses-of-data-on-western-targets-documents-show/2021/12/31/3981ce9c-538e-11ec-8927-c396fa861a71\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-harvests-masses-of-data-on-western-targets-documents-show/2021/12/31/3981ce9c-538e-11ec-8927-c396fa861a71_story.html).
  - 3 Cadell, "China Harvests Masses of Data on Western Targets, Documents Show."
  - 4 Caitlin Thompson, "Enter the Grayzone: Fringe Leftists Deny the Scale of China's Uyghur Repression," *Coda Story*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/grayzone-xinjiang-denialism/>.

Economic statecraft has also proven highly effective in neutralizing Uyghur diaspora communities. China's global rise and the launch of its colossal BRI have granted it unprecedented leverage to pursue policies of transnational repression in partner countries. Of the 10 countries where Uyghurs remain most vulnerable to detention or extradition, China is the largest creditor in five (Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Cambodia, and Myanmar), tempting these countries to trade human rights for economic opportunity (see Appendix Three). In Egypt, Turkey, and other countries where pressure on Uyghurs is growing, China has established itself as a vital strategic and economic partner. As China's economy continues to grow, more countries will be locked into relations of dependence, increasing Beijing's capacity to pursue dissidents within their borders. Unchecked, the CCP's transnational repression is likely to expand in both scale and scope. Tajikistan is a particularly illustrative example of China's capacity to leverage its economic and political weight to pursue domestic security objectives in neighboring countries. Beijing holds more than half of Tajikistan's \$2.8 billion external debt, which is equal to 35.9 percent of its GDP.<sup>5</sup> In the past, Dushanbe has paid off debts to China by ceding mining rights, and allegedly, 0.7 percent of its national territory.<sup>6</sup> Since joining the BRI in 2017, Tajikistan has seen its trade imbalance with China grow from 12 percent of GDP in 2016 to 22 percent in 2018.<sup>7</sup> As China's economic presence in Tajikistan has grown, it has built strategic facilities and border outposts across the country. The end result has been a decline in the Central Asian republic's Uyghur population from a height of 3,000 in 2016 to just 100 today as the country has rounded up civilians and deported them to China.<sup>8</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new opportunities for China to force states to fall in line with its Uyghur agenda. In June 2021, Ukraine

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- 5 David Trilling, "Borrowing Blind: Why We Don't Know How Much Eurasia Owes China," *Eurasianet*, October 23, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/borrowing-blind-why-we-dont-know-how-much-eurasia-owes-china>.
  - 6 Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "Perspectives: Tajikistan's Security Ties With China a Faustian Bargain," *Eurasianet*, March 2, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-tajikistans-security-ties-with-china-a-faustian-bargain>.
  - 7 Jardine and Lemon, "Perspectives: Tajikistan's Security Ties With China a Faustian Bargain."
  - 8 Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan Accused of Helping China in Campaign against Uyghurs," *Radio Free Europe*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/31309627.html>.

joined a statement by over 40 countries at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, urging China to allow independent observers to enter the Uyghur region. China responded by threatening to block a shipment of COVID-19 vaccines to Ukraine, forcing the government in Kyiv to back down.<sup>9</sup>

One of the starkest findings of this report is the diverse array of interests and motivations behind the decisions of governments across the Muslim world to collaborate with China in oppressing Uyghurs. In post-Soviet Central Asia, secular autocrats trained in the Soviet system see China as an ideological ally in suppressing dissent. The outcome of this mutual alignment was the creation of the “Three Evils” framework within the SCO through which China and the Central Asian republics pursue political activists and Uyghur refugees. In South Asia, Pakistan has prioritized closer relations with China over championing Uyghur rights as part of its geopolitical struggle with India. This framework is still used by Islamabad to justify its complicity in China’s transnational repression in order to gain military technology and financial investment such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Similarly, the extremist Taliban movement has collaborated in repressing Uyghurs as a means of building relations with China, which senior Taliban leaders see as a potential ally to consolidate power, gain investment, and shield themselves from criticism of their human rights abuse. Motivations in the MENA region, particularly of Egypt, UAE, and Saudi Arabia follow a similar trajectory. In the aftermath of the 2010 Arab Spring, these governments sought to suppress popular Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which they saw as threats to their regimes. Each of them has turned to the PRC as a source of political and economic support; each has, in turn, sacrificed their Uyghur minorities to pursue this deeper collaboration. Finally, Turkey—long the voice of the Uyghur diaspora—has turned increasingly to China in the face of its growing international isolation. In sum, while the Muslim world has shown a unified voice when it comes to the treatment of Palestinians or the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, its position has proven far more fragmented with regard to China. As Beijing has ex-

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9 Jamey Keaten, “Diplomats Say China Puts Squeeze on Ukraine,” *Associated Press*, June 25, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-china-europe-ukraine-health-a0a5ae8f735b92e39c623e453529cbb9>

panded its political and economic reach across the Muslim world, the vulnerability of its Uyghurs has increased.

As this report has argued, the large Uyghur community in Central Asia was neutralized after China established effective international frameworks for targeting and detaining political activists. Nevertheless, pockets of resistance remain, including the invaluable work of Kazakh activists associated with Atajurt and its successor organizations, as well as the Almaty-based Xinjiang Victims Database, which has provided a window into the state-violence unfolding in the Uyghur region across the Kazakh border. The Kazakh government has worked with China to silence these organizations, targeting Atajurt leader Serikzhan Bilash and revoking the visa of Gene Bunin, the activist who has tirelessly logged individuals who have disappeared into the XUAR's sprawling system of internment camps.<sup>10</sup> Their continued work and the regular protests in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan suggest Uyghur and Turkic peoples of the region will continue to put pressure on China's Party-state.

The Uyghurs in Turkey also continue to be a powerful voice holding Beijing to account, but they are being systematically undercut as China's government wields its economic influence to encourage Ankara to collaborate. The key weapon in this campaign is enforced statelessness. Tenuous residency permits, combined with China's refusal to renew travel documents have left large segments of the Turkish Uyghur community powerless to speak up. The U.S. and its allies should press Ankara to provide safer guarantees for stateless Uyghurs and provide refugee status to more Uyghurs so that they can resettle in Europe, North America, and the Asia Pacific. Uyghurs with Turkish citizenship remain a prominent voice in Turkish society and they should work with Washington and Brussels to press Turkey to provide citizenship to stateless and at-risk members of their community.

China's transnational repression of Uyghurs demonstrates the unprecedented reach of global authoritarianism. Through learning, co-optation, or manipulation, the Chinese government has extended its power well beyond its sovereign borders. However, these trends go beyond a rising China.

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10 Chris Rickleton, "China Hounds Xinjiang Data Collectors," *Eurasianet*, May 12, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/china-hounds-xinjiang-data-collectors>.

In the emerging multipolar order, governments are growing increasingly centralized, global civil society is in retreat, and emerging technology has created unprecedented possibilities for the transnational projection of state power. In the XUAR, algorithmic governance and “predictive” policing have played a central role in China’s post-2017 crackdown on the Uyghurs.

The IJOP has given XUAR authorities the tools to not only manage the region’s population but to control the narrative overseas. In particular, the IJOP has allowed the Xinjiang PSB to better assess networks between Uyghurs abroad and those left behind in the XUAR, providing them with a source of leverage to curtail their political activism in the liberal democratic world, and ensure that alternative voices and messages are not heard.

As Darren Byler has argued, these emerging technological systems of oppression within China’s borders are locked into the global economy and much of the technical know-how first emerged in Silicon Valley.<sup>11</sup> China is not alone in profiting from the surveillance industrial complex. Countries such as Israel have also commodified the surveillance and harassment of journalists and activists around the world, offering cutting-edge spy tools like Pegasus to government clients.<sup>12</sup> Surveillance tech is eroding privacy in mass consumer markets too, with the proliferation of “stalkerware” tech that allows individuals to monitor their partners without their consent.<sup>13</sup> This category of technology remains dangerously unregulated around the world.<sup>14</sup>

The “digital penal colony” of the XUAR may, in fact, be a precursor of similar strategies used by nationalist governments to control contested territories.<sup>15</sup> In Indian-Administered Kashmir, social media and telecommunications were shut down across the region in August 2019 after New Delhi

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11 Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), <https://www.dukeupress.edu/terror-capitalism>.

12 Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti, “The Battle for the World’s Most Powerful Cyberweapon,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/magazine/nso-group-israel-spyware.html>

13 Brian Chen, “‘Stalkerware’ Apps Are Proliferating. Protect Yourself,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/29/technology/personaltech/stalkerware-apps-protection.html>

14 See “The Global Drive to Control Big Tech,” Human Rights Watch, December 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2021/global-drive-control-big-tech>

15 Darren Byler, *In the Camps: China’s High-Tech Penal Colony*, (New York: Columbia Global Reports, October 12, 2021), <https://globalreports.columbia.edu/books/in-the-camps/>.

announced it would revoke the region's semi-autonomous status and split it into two federally-administered territories.<sup>16</sup> The blackout is the longest ever to occur in a democracy and employed tactics first seen in the Uyghur region in 2009 in the aftermath of the unrest in Ürümqi. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, the Israeli military has integrated facial recognition software with a growing network of smartphones and cameras reminiscent of the XUAR's IJOP. Using software called Blue Wolf, Israeli Defense Force soldiers were allegedly tasked to compete to photograph as many Palestinians as possible, including children and the elderly, to construct the database.<sup>17</sup> International silence on the Uyghurs will only serve to accelerate the trend toward a race to the bottom on human rights.

While there is little that can be done within China's borders to prevent the securitization of the XUAR, Uyghurs around the world may pose the greatest barrier to the CCP's plans to steamroll their homeland into submission. Uyghurs living in North America, Europe, and the Asia Pacific have proven especially effective at pushing for policy changes and keeping international pressure on China. They have also spurred grassroots activism and cross-border mobilization that has revitalized embattled communities in cities like Istanbul. For example, on February 4, 2022, Uyghur Canadian Mehliya Cetinkaya flew to Istanbul to provide a series of speeches to Uyghurs in Turkey protesting the Beijing Winter Olympics during the opening ceremony. This is but one example of the thousands of cases of transnational activism that have taken place since 2017 as Uyghurs fight to protect and free their families.

Democratic governments should provide funding for education and leadership training programs to make Uyghurs more effective spokespeople for advancing the cause of rolling back the security regime in the XUAR. The diaspora has grown substantially since the 2009 unrest in the Uyghur region and the state violence advanced by Beijing against their families has

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16 Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Many Lives Have Been Lost: Five-Month Internet Blackout Plunges Kashmir Into Crisis," *The Guardian*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/05/the-personal-and-economic-cost-of-kashmir's-internet-ban>

17 Elizabeth Dvoskin, "Israel Escalates Surveillance of Palestinians With Facial Recognition Programs in West Bank," *Washington Post*, November 8, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/israel-palestinians-surveillance-facial-recognition/2021/11/05/3787bf42-26b2-11ec-8739-5cb6aba30a30\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-palestinians-surveillance-facial-recognition/2021/11/05/3787bf42-26b2-11ec-8739-5cb6aba30a30_story.html)

only served to push more of them toward political activism. My data indicates that 35 percent of individuals in the 180 detailed stage 1 incidents became vocal and in some cases, politically active only after China's Party-state had engaged in transnational repression against them. This dynamic has, in turn, accelerated China's targeting of Uyghurs as Beijing increasingly views them as a threat to absolutist governance of the XUAR.

The events unfolding in the Uyghur region present one of the gravest humanitarian crises of our time. But China's totalitarian system of oppression in the XUAR may have sown the seeds of its own destruction in internationalizing the Uyghur issue with its campaign of surveillance and mass incarceration. The international community must work with the Uyghur people to reverse the rising tide of autocracy and curtail the spread of transnational repression before it's too late.

# Policy Recommendations

**IT IS CLEAR** that the international community must counter China's use of transnational repression and protect Uyghurs and other vulnerable populations from state violence. Below, I suggest policies for international organizations, civil society, and national governments concerning China.

## Policy recommendations for the United States:

- **Strengthen refugee resettlement programs by increasing quotas and streamlining procedures.** Governments should increase their quota of refugees from China and third countries likely to extradite citizens to China, such as Turkey, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Governments should also streamline their procedures for vetting and granting asylum to refugees. Countries such as Thailand, which account for most deportations and extraditions, should be pressured to revise their asylum procedures to better protect human rights.
- **Submit reports on Chinese transnational repression to legislative bodies.** Democratic states should adopt similar policies to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, and require relevant government departments and agencies to submit reports to their parliaments on the human rights violations in the Uyghur region. These reports should also list key officials, entities, and others responsible for intimidating, harassing, or targeting members of the Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic Muslim groups from the XUAR within their territories.
- **Provide education funding and leadership training for Uyghur community activists.** Uyghurs residing in liberal democracies are a potential bulwark against transnational repression. Diaspora community leaders have and will continue to pressure their host

governments to keep Uyghur issues on the policy agenda, invigorate their communities, and place international pressure on China.

- **Create an avenue for Uyghurs to report harassment and intimidation to domestic security services.** Uyghurs living in democratic states should be able to report harassment, intimidation, and threats they face to their host governments. Domestic security services should work with the local Uyghur diaspora community to ensure that it is user-friendly, accessible, and Uyghur language-enabled.
- **Restrict the export of surveillance technology.** States in the West must prevent the sale of Western surveillance tools to illiberal regimes, including China. With an array of powerful tools on the market—from malware to cameras and software—it is crucial that the West stop the sale and proliferation of these tools to states who would abuse them.

**The United States should work with international partners to ensure that the international community:**

- **Appoint a UN Special Rapporteur on Transnational Repression.** The UN should appoint an individual to “examine, monitor, advise, and publicly report” on transnational repression. A UN-sanctioned report on these topics will shed more light on the repressive practices of malign actors, including China, offering critical insights that will give countries the necessary rhetorical and legal justifications to criticize and counter China.
- **Develop strict international standards for the spyware market.** The international community should seek to set standards and establish norms for the use and abuse of surveillance technology worldwide. With these standards in place, redress will become a possibility in cases of abuse. Western companies providing surveillance tools to the Xinjiang PSB that are then used to target and surveil Uyghurs and infringe on their rights should be named, and their practices targeted through litigation, both domestically and internationally.

- **Include digital rights in discussions of international human rights.** Discussions on the civil liberties and rights of refugees and persecuted minorities should include their digital rights: freedom from surveillance, intimidation, harassment, and a renewed commitment to the freedom of speech and expression. These discussions of digital rights should be focused on the voices of Uyghurs.
- **Encourage support from international allies.** Countries in the MENA and Pakistan have long been strategic partners and allies with countries in the West. The U.S. and its Western allies should offer their partners in the MENA and South Asia economic and security agreements, designed to compete with Chinese global initiatives and influence. These agreements should be made conditional to these states' cooperation on Chinese transnational repression in the region.
- **Form a caucus of democratic states within Interpol.** As the recent election of Maj. Gen. Ahmed Naser Al-Raisi (United Arab Emirates) to the presidency of Interpol makes clear, it is crucial—now more than ever—that democratic states work together to prevent co-optation and abuse of international organizations such as Interpol. Democracies make up 14 of the 15 top statutory funders of the international policing organization. These democracies should form a coalition and vote together on key votes and work to promote policies that would insulate Interpol against abuse. These policies could include pushing for abusers to be suspended from accessing Interpol databases, as stipulated by Article 131 of the Rules on the Processing Data.

### Recommendations for civil society:

- **Assign refugee case managers to work with Uyghurs on digital safety.** Case managers are trusted sources for refugees and could serve as a resource for technical knowledge and assistance on privacy. Governments should provide subsidies for refugee resettlement organizations to learn about digital hygiene and the basics of

cybersecurity. Case managers can then pass on these skills to the refugees they are helping resettle.

- **Leverage other organizations to improve digital fluency.**

Smartphone applications should be promoted, allowing Uyghurs to leverage the expertise of more experienced community members.

Strong communities of practice will make it easier to share information on threats, provide emergency response and assistance, and provide education on information security.

# Acknowledgments

**I AM GRATEFUL** to Robert Daly for his insightful remarks and encouragement. I would also like to thank the Stephen A. Schwarzman Education Foundation and the Wilson Center for the fellowship they jointly created. I would also like to thank the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute and Kissinger Institute, which have supported my work. Huge thanks to Dr. Edward Lemon and our team at the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs for helping me realize my vision for this and related projects. I would also like to thank Natalie Hall for her tireless work on our China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Database and invaluable fact checks on individual cases. Natalie was also very gracious in agreeing to edit this project. In addition, I would like to thank all my colleagues who have advised me throughout the writing of this monograph, including Robert Evans, Lucille Greer, Rui Zhong, and Peter Liakhov; in addition to Henryk Szadziewski, Dr. Elise Anderson, Mustafa Aksu, Omer Kanat, and the rest of the team at the Uyghur Human Rights Project who have provided an enormous amount of help through their extensive feedback and networks among the Uyghur diaspora. Also, my family in Scotland whom I miss dearly and have been unable to visit throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Lastly, I would like to thank the Uyghurs residing worldwide whose stories I have tried to faithfully recount within these pages. The views expressed in this report are my own.

*Bradley Jardine*

Washington, D.C., January 2022

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Link to the Central Asia Protest Tracker: <https://oxussociety.org/viz/protest-tracker/>

## APPENDIX I

# Bilateral Extradition Treaties

The countries in the China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset are indicated in bold.

Country	Signed	Effective
<b>Thailand</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1999</b>
Belarus	1995	1998
<b>Russia</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1997</b>
Bulgaria	1996	1997
Romania	1996	1999
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1998</b>
Mongolia	1997	1999
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2004</b>
Ukraine	1998	2000
<b>Cambodia</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>
South Korea	2000	2002
Philippines	2001	2006
Peru	2001	2003
Tunisia	2001	2005
South Africa	2001	2004
<b>Laos</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>

## Appendix I: Bilateral Extradition Treaties

<b>Country</b>	<b>Signed</b>	<b>Effective</b>
<b>the United Arab Emirates</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2004</b>
Lithuania	2002	2003
<b>Pakistan</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2008</b>
Lesotho	2003	2005
Brazil	2004	2014
Azerbaijan	2005	2010
Spain	2005	2007
Namibia	2005	2009
Angola	2006	2013
Algeria	2006	2009
Portugal	2007	2009
France	2007	2015
Mexico	2008	2012
<b>Bosnia-Herzegovina</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2014</b>
<b>Italy</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>
Iran	2012	2017
<b>Tajikistan</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2017</b>
<b>Turkey</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>Pending parliamentary ratification</b>

## APPENDIX II

# Signatories of UN Letters Supporting China's Policies in the Uyghur Region

The actual list of signatories is larger but the table above contains only countries that have detained, deported, or harassed Uyghurs on China's behalf.<sup>1</sup>

Country	Signed 2019 Letter	Signed 2020 Letter
Cambodia	●	●
Egypt	●	●
Laos	●	●
Myanmar	●	●
Russia	●	●
Pakistan	●	●
Saudi Arabia	●	●
UAE	●	●
Syria	●	●
Morocco		●
Nepal		●
Tajikistan	●	●
Qatar	●	●

1 Chart originally appeared in Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs*.

## APPENDIX III

# Countries With the Highest Numbers of Stage 2 and 3 Cases of Transnational Repression of Uyghurs<sup>1</sup>

Country	Stage 2 and Stage 3 Cases	Extradition Treaty With China	Supports China on XUAR	Listed as Dangerous by XUAR Police	% of Foreign Debt Owned by China <sup>2</sup>	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank Member
<b>Thailand</b>	425	Y	N	Y	1	Y
<b>Turkey</b>	399	Y	N	Y	1	Y
<b>Egypt</b>	231	N	Y	Y	5	N
<b>Malaysia</b>	188	N	N	Y	5	Y
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	75	Y	N	Y	40	Y
<b>Pakistan</b>	57	Y	Y	Y	25	Y
<b>Afghanistan</b>	40	N	N	Y	1	Y
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	23	Y	N	Y	5	Y
<b>Cambodia</b>	22	Y	Y	N	49	Y
<b>Myanmar</b>	17	N	Y	Y	40	Y

1 Chart originally appeared in Jardine, Lemon, and Hall, *No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs*.

2 Data is accurate as of 2019.

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