

EXTERMINATION OF UIGHUR MUSLIMS IN CHINA

Hamza Kyeyune



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 Analysis

The Uighurs are ethnically and culturally a Muslim Turkic people, living for generations in the Xinjiang region of China. The territory they live in is of strategic importance for the Chinese government's "Belt and Road Initiative," which is China's future access point to vital trade routes throughout Central Asian, European and African countries. It also sits on China's largest coal and natural gas reserves, located on the sensitive frontier with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Uighurs have long faced discrimination and restrictions on their cultural and religious activities. Human rights organizations maintain that economic benefits of resource extraction and developments are often disproportionately enjoyed by other ethnic

group in the region such as the Hans, while the Uighurs are becoming increasingly marginalized.

The Chinese Communist Party encouraged the Han ethnic to migrate to Xinjiang with the aim to change the demographic there, luring them with the promise of "hukou", a coveted status that facilitates access to essential social services like housing, pensions, health care and education.

In 1949, Xinjiang's Han population comprised merely 6 percent of the total population. By 2010, the Han population had risen to at least 40 percent. Its heavily industrialized capital, Urumqi, has a population of more than 2.3 million, about 75% of whom are Han, 12.8% are Uyghur,

and 10% are from other ethnic groups. Han-run companies only employ Hans and so are most of government jobs. It is increasingly harder for the Uighur community to find jobs; hence it is understandable when the Uighurs feel that they are being alienated in their own land.

The Chinese government claims that the Uighur Muslims hold an extremist view; it went so far and published a policy paper last year claiming it had arrested 13,000 “terrorists” in Xinjiang province alone since 2014. The Uighurs assert that China wants to reshape their land to aid its economic and political goals, and in order to achieve that, the Chinese government defamed Uighurs as terrorists and extremists to exterminate their identity and culture.

The Chinese government constructed facilities it calls “vocational training centers” claiming that the facilities provide the Uighurs with courses such as tailoring, electronic assembly and the Chinese language, where more than one million Uighur Muslims have been held since April 2017. Satellite imagery of the sites found that thirty nine of the detention camps cover a total area roughly the size of 140 soccer fields.

Unlike the Chinese government’s claims about the camps, Uighur victims report that these camps are no more than concentration camps, complete with armed guards and barbed-wire fences. Inside, prisoners are indoctrinated with the country’s Communist Party propaganda, forced to renounce Islam, and have been forced to eat pork and drink alcohol in violation of their religious beliefs.

Mass detentions of Uyghur Muslims can be traced back to Xi Jinping’s first and only visit to Xinjiang as China’s leader in 2014. After becoming president, he spent four

days in the region, and on the last day of the trip, two Uighur militants staged a suicide bombing outside a train station in Urumqi that injured nearly 80 people, one fatally.

President Xi Jinping blamed the lack of control on religion, suggesting that his predecessors had let down their guard. While previous Chinese leaders emphasized economic development to stifle unrests in Xinjiang, President Xi believed that it was not enough. He demanded an ideological cure, an effort to rewire the thinking of the region’s Muslim minorities.

The remarks of President Xi Jinping suggested he was alarmed by the revival of public piety. The Chinese Communist party’s greater philosophy is, any religion or ideology that recognizes a higher power than the party is a threat that must be brought to heel or eliminated. Political and cultural conformity must be enforced at all costs.

The Chinese government has since come to characterize any expression of Islam in Xinjiang as extremism. The authorities laid out dozens of signs, including common behavior among devout Uighurs. In March 2017 for example, the Xinjiang government passed an anti-extremism law that prohibited its people from growing long beards and wearing veils in public. It also officially recognized the use of training centers to eliminate extremism. Journalists reporting from Xinjiang found that many aspects of Islamic traditions have been erased. The Communist Party members have been recruited since 2014 to stay inside the homes of the Uighurs and report on any perceived “extremist” behaviors, including fasting during Ramadan or abstaining from alcohol. Officials have destroyed mosques, claiming the buildings were shoddily constructed and

unsafe for worshippers. Halal food is also becoming harder to find in Urumqi as the local government has launched a campaign against it.

Despite the horrendous atrocities the Uighurs are facing, they are also faced with a muted voice from the Muslim populated countries. In July 2019, European countries signed a letter to the UN Human Rights chief condemning China's actions in Xinjiang. Thereafter, some Muslim majority countries including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, signed their own letter praising China's "remarkable achievements" in human rights and its "counterterrorism" efforts in Xinjiang. Turkey remains the only Muslim-majority country to voice concern when its foreign minister called on China to ensure "the full protection of the cultural identities of the Uighurs and other Muslims" during a UN Human Rights Council session.

Leaked files shared by The New York Times exposed how China organized mass detentions of Muslims. The directive was among 403 pages of internal documents that have been shared in one of the most significant leaks of government papers from inside China's ruling Communist Party in decades. They provide an unprecedented inside view of the continuing clampdown in Xinjiang, in which the authorities have corralled as many as a million ethnic Uighurs, Kazakhs and others into internment camps and prisons over the past three years.

The leaked papers consist of 24 documents, with nearly 200 pages of internal speeches

by President Xi and other leaders, and more than 150 pages of directives and reports on the surveillance and control of the Uighur population in Xinjiang. There are also references to plans to extend restrictions on Islam to other parts of China.

Of the 24 documents, there is one certain directive on how to handle minority students returning home to Xinjiang in the summer of 2017. Officials in Turpan, a city in eastern Xinjiang, drafted Q&A script after the regional government warned local officials to prepare for the returning students. The leadership distributed a classified directive advising local officials to corner returning students as soon as they arrived and keep them quiet. It included a chillingly bureaucratic guide for how to handle their anguished questions, beginning with the most obvious question such as: Where is my family? The Q&A script also included a barely concealed threat: Students were to be told that their behavior could either shorten or extend the detention of their relatives.

The papers were brought to light by a member of the Chinese political establishment who requested anonymity and expressed hope that their disclosure would prevent party leaders, including President Xi, from escaping culpability for the mass detentions.

Continued oppression of the Uighurs by China could cause great backlash not only among Hans and Uighur, but also could put China on a path of confrontation with its own people. The international community must begin to treat this issue with the urgency it deserves.