



Uyghurs in China

Uyghurs (also spelled “Uighurs”) are a Muslim ethnic group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the far northwest of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). They have garnered the attention of U.S. policymakers, particularly since 2018 following reports of the mass internment of Uyghurs in “reeducation” centers. The detentions are part of a PRC government effort to systematically transform the thought and behavior of Uyghurs and forcefully assimilate them into Chinese society, which some observers believe may result in the destruction of Uyghur culture and identity. The U.S. government has responded by implementing targeted restrictions on trade with Xinjiang and imposing visa and economic sanctions on some PRC officials.

Uyghurs speak a Turkic language and practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam. The XUAR, often referred to simply as Xinjiang (pronounced “SHIN-jyahng”), is a provincial-level administrative region which comprises about one-sixth of China’s total land area and borders eight countries. The region is rich in minerals, produces over 80% of China’s cotton, and has China’s largest coal and natural gas reserves and a fifth of its oil reserves. The XUAR is a strategic region for the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative, which involves Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and energy development in neighboring Central and South Asia.



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

All or parts of the area comprising Xinjiang have been under the political control or influence of Chinese, Mongols, and Russians for long spans of the region’s documented history, along with periods of Turkic or Uyghur rule. Uyghurs played a role in the establishment of two short-lived, semi-autonomous East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s. The PRC asserted control over Xinjiang in 1949 and established the XUAR in 1955. Uyghurs once were the predominant ethnic group in the XUAR; they now constitute roughly 45% of the region’s population of 24 million, or around 10.5 million. The government long has provided economic incentives for Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, to migrate

to the region; Hans now constitute about 40% of the XUAR population and form the majority in Urumqi, the capital.

Since an outbreak of Uyghur demonstrations and ethnic unrest in 2009, and sporadic clashes involving Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel that spiked between 2013 and 2015, PRC leaders have sought to “stabilize” the XUAR through large scale criminal arrests and more intensive security measures aimed at combatting “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.” Three violent incidents in China in 2014 purportedly carried out by Uyghurs against Han civilians were described by some outside observers as acts of terrorism. Some experts argue that the PRC government has used counterterrorism as a pretext for carrying out forced assimilation policies.

Forced Assimilation

Since 2017, in tandem with a new national policy referred to as “Sinicization,” XUAR authorities have instituted measures to assimilate Uyghurs into Han Chinese society and reduce the influences of Uyghur, Islamic, and Arabic cultures and languages. The XUAR government enacted a law in 2017 that prohibits “expressions of extremification” and placed restrictions, often imposed arbitrarily, upon dress and grooming, traditional Uyghur customs, and adherence to Islamic dietary laws (halal). Thousands of mosques in Xinjiang reportedly have been demolished or “Sinicized,” whereby Islamic motifs and Arabic writings have been removed. There have been reports of government campaigns to forcefully reduce birth rates among Uyghurs and to promote marriages between Uyghurs and Hans.

Beginning in 2016, Chen Quanguo, the newly appointed Communist Party Secretary of the XUAR, stepped up security and surveillance measures aimed at the Uyghur population. Such actions included the installation of thousands of neighborhood police kiosks, more intrusive monitoring of Internet use, and the collection of biometric data for identification purposes. The central government sent an estimated one million officials and state workers from outside Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Han, to live temporarily in Uyghur homes to assess their compliance with government policies.

Mass Internment

By some estimates, between 2017 and 2020, Xinjiang authorities arbitrarily detained roughly 1.5 million Turkic Muslims, mostly Uyghurs and a smaller number of ethnic Kazakhs, in “reeducation” centers. Detainees, some of whom may have engaged in religious, cultural, or scholarly activities that the government now deems as extremist, are compelled to renounce many of their Islamic beliefs and customs and political views as a condition for their release. They reportedly are forced to undergo self-criticisms and express their love of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

According to some former detainees, treatment and conditions in the centers include factory labor, crowded and unsanitary conditions, food deprivation, beatings, and sexual abuse.

In the second half of 2019, PRC officials claimed that most detainees had been released, although many Uyghurs living abroad say that they still have not heard from missing relatives in Xinjiang. According to some reports, many detainees likely have been formally convicted of crimes and placed in higher security facilities. Some reeducation centers appear to have been decommissioned, while dozens of new or repurposed facilities resembling prisons have appeared. The government has relocated other former detainees and their families to special residential compounds and restricted travel in and out.

Forced Labor

Many Uyghurs reportedly have been assigned to factory employment in Xinjiang and other PRC provinces under conditions that indicate forced labor. According to some research reports, the central government has promoted the movement of large numbers of Uyghurs, including former detainees, into the formal workforce, particularly into textile, apparel, footwear, and other labor-intensive industries. Uyghurs who refuse to accept such employment may be threatened with detention. In addition to labor, factory employment often involves heavy surveillance and political indoctrination during and after work.

Selected U.S. Responses

Legislation. On June 17, 2020, President Trump signed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-145) into law. The act aims to impose visa and economic sanctions on PRC officials determined to be responsible for human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. The act also mandates the Department of State, the Director of National Intelligence, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, respectively, to submit reports to the relevant congressional committees on the following: (1) human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including detention and forced labor; (2) the security and economic implications posed to the United States by PRC policies in Xinjiang, including a list of Chinese companies involved in constructing or operating internment camps or providing mass surveillance equipment; and (3) U.S. efforts to protect Uyghur-Americans and ethnic Uyghurs from China residing in the United States from harassment or intimidation by officials or agents of the PRC government.

Targeted Sanctions. In July 2020, the Trump Administration designated six current and former CCP officials in Xinjiang, including XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo, for sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818. E.O. 13818 implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328), which authorizes the President to impose both economic sanctions and visa denials or revocations against foreign individuals or entities responsible for human rights abuses or corruption. Also designated under E.O. 13818 were the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a state-run paramilitary

organization with major economic interests in the XUAR. The State Department has additionally announced visa restrictions against Xinjiang officials and their immediate family members pursuant to other authorities.

Import Restrictions. Since October 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CPB) has issued a series of announcements blocking the import of certain goods suspected of involving Xinjiang-related forced labor pursuant to the forced labor import ban under Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930. Most significantly, CPB in January 2021 issued a region-wide order to block the import of cotton and tomato products originating in Xinjiang. Prior orders targeted certain products from specified companies or other entities in Xinjiang.

Export Controls. Since October 2019, the U.S. Department of Commerce has added a total of 52 PRC companies and public security entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) “entity list” under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) for their connection to PRC human rights abuses, with 48 of these specifically related to Xinjiang. The actions impose licensing requirements prior to the sale or transfer of certain U.S. items to these entities, with a presumption of license denial for most items.

Atrocities Determination. On January 19, 2021, the State Department announced that it had determined that the PRC had committed crimes against humanity and genocide in Xinjiang, and called on multilateral and juridical bodies to pursue accountability. The determination may portend additional U.S. policy actions.

East Turkestan Islamic Movement

The PRC government has attributed some past deadly incidents in the XUAR to the “East Turkestan Islamic Movement” (ETIM), which it portrays as a Uyghur separatist and terrorist group with ties to global terrorist organizations. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002 (to block terrorist financing) and in 2004 placed ETIM on the Terrorist Exclusion List, which bars members of terrorist groups from entering the United States. In November 2020, the Trump Administration removed ETIM from the Terrorist Exclusion List, stating that “for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist.”

At its height in the late-1990s and early-2000s, ETIM was a small, loosely organized and poorly financed group based in Afghanistan and Pakistan that lacked weapons and had little contact with global jihadist organizations, according to some experts. The Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), which some reports refer to as the successor to ETIM, emerged around 2004. TIP purportedly had stronger links to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but was primarily engaged in producing videos promoting attacks against PRC targets, and lacked its own capacity to carry them out.

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