



Uyghurs in China

Uyghurs (also spelled “Uighurs”) are an ethnic group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) far northwest. Uyghurs speak a Turkic language and practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam. The XUAR, often referred to simply as Xinjiang (pronounced “SHIN-jyahng”), is a provincial-level administrative region which comprises about one-sixth of China’s total land area and borders eight countries. The region is rich in minerals, 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 includes 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 periods of the region’s documented history, along with periods of Turkic or Uyghur rule. Uyghurs played a role in the establishment of two short-lived East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s. The PRC asserted control over Xinjiang in 1949 and established the XUAR in 1955. Uyghurs once were the predominant ethnic group in the XUAR; they now constitute roughly 45% of the region’s population of 24 million, or around 10.5 million, as many Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, have migrated there, particularly to the provincial capital, Urumqi. Many Uyghurs complain that Hans have benefitted disproportionately from economic development in Xinjiang.

Human Rights Issues

Since an outbreak of demonstrations and ethnic unrest in 2009, and clashes involving Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel that spiked between 2013 and 2015, PRC leaders have sought to “stabilize” the XUAR through more intensive security measures aimed at combatting “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.” PRC official data

indicates that criminal arrests in Xinjiang increased from approximately 14,000 in 2013 to 228,000 in 2017.

Two prominent Uyghurs serving life sentences for state security crimes are Ilham Tohti (convicted in 2014), a Uyghur economics professor who had maintained a website related to Uyghur issues, and Gulmira Imin (convicted in 2010), who had managed a Uyghur language website and participated in the 2009 protests. In September 2017, former Xinjiang University President Tashpolat Teyip, an ethnic Uyghur, was convicted of separatism in a secret trial and received a death sentence with a two-year reprieve. His status is unknown.

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, practices of 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 a government campaign to forcefully reduce birth rates among Turkic Muslims in the region.

Beginning in 2016, the newly appointed Communist Party Secretary of the XUAR, former Tibet Party Secretary Chen Quanguo, 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, since 2017, Xinjiang authorities have arbitrarily detained 1.5 million Turkic Muslims, mostly Uyghurs and a smaller number of Kazakhs, in “reeducation camps.” The facilities also have held many prominent Uyghur intellectuals. PRC officials describe the facilities as “vocational education and training centers” where “trainees” study Chinese, learn job skills, undergo “de-extremization” and are to be “cured of ideological infection.” Some may have engaged in religious and ethnic cultural practices that the government now perceives as extremist, or as manifesting “strongly religious” views or thoughts that could lead to the spread of religious

extremism or terrorism. Detainees reportedly are compelled to renounce many of their Islamic beliefs and customs.

Forced and Involuntary Labor

In July 2019, Xinjiang 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, the government has begun to move large numbers of Uyghurs, including many former detainees, into textile, apparel, and other labor-intensive industries in Xinjiang and other PRC provinces. Uyghurs who refuse to accept such employment may be threatened with detention. In addition, they continue to be heavily monitored outside of work, and are required to attend political study classes at night. In March 2020, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China released a report, “Global Supply Chains, Forced Labor, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.” A study by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute identified nearly 120 Chinese and foreign companies, including global brands, that the institute alleges directly or indirectly benefit from Uyghur labor in potentially abusive circumstances.

Selected U.S. Responses

In October 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection announced that it had blocked certain shipments of goods suspected of involving forced labor from five countries, including China, pursuant to the forced labor import ban in Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930. The Chinese goods, sportswear made for a U.S. company, were suspected of using forced labor from a Xinjiang reeducation camp.

In October 2019, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced that it would add 28 PRC entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) “entity list” under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR), for their connections to PRC human rights abuses against Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang. The action imposes licensing requirements prior to the sale or transfer of U.S. items to these entities. In May 2020, the Commerce Department placed an additional nine PRC entities on the list.

In October 2019, the State Department announced visa restrictions (under the Immigration and Nationality Act) against an unspecified number of Chinese government and Communist Party officials who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, the detention or abuse of Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang. The department subsequently announced restrictions on additional unspecified Party officials in July 2020.

On June 17, 2020, President Trump signed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 into law (P.L. 116-145). 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 relevant Congressional committees on the following: human rights abuses, including detention and forced labor; 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 producing mass surveillance equipment for Xinjiang; and U.S. efforts to protect Uyghur Americans and ethnic Uyghurs from China legally residing in the United States from harassment or intimidation by officials or agents of the PRC government.

On July 9, 2020, the Trump Administration designated four current and former Communist Party officials in Xinjiang, including XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo (a member of the CCP Politburo), and the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau, to be sanctioned pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818. E.O. 13818 implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which was enacted as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2017 (P.L. 114-328) and 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. The State Department also announced that it was publicly designating three of the officials for visa restrictions pursuant to Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020 (Division G of P.L. 116-94) due to their involvement in gross violations of human rights; these designations additionally extend visa restrictions to the officials’ immediate family members.

Pending Uyghur-related legislation includes the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (S. 3471 and H.R. 6210), which among other provisions would create a presumption of denial of import into the United States of items produced, wholly or in part, in Xinjiang or by certain Xinjiang-related entities pursuant to Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930.

Alleged Terrorism

The PRC government has attributed numerous 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 placed ETIM on the Terrorist Exclusion List in 2004. ETIM is not on the Department of State’s narrower “Foreign Terrorist Organization” (FTO) list. Roughly 100 Uyghurs from China entered Islamic State territory during 2013-2014, according to the New America Foundation.

At its height, ETIM, whose members reportedly spent time in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the late-1990s to the mid-2000s, was a small, loosely organized and poorly financed group that lacked weapons and had little if any contact with global jihadist groups, according to some experts. The U.S. government “identified sufficient evidence” to consider three violent incidents in China purportedly involving Uyghurs as terrorist attacks in 2014. The lack of available information has made it difficult to verify most other PRC accounts of alleged terrorist activity.

Thomas Lum, Specialist in Asian Affairs
Michael A. Weber, Analyst in Foreign Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.