



China Primer: Uyghurs

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. One of the few parts of China to receive natural snow, Xinjiang also is a focus of Beijing’s efforts to develop winter sports in preparation for its hosting of the 2022 Winter Olympics.



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 make up roughly half of the region’s population of 24.8 million, according to official sources. The government long has provided economic incentives for Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, to migrate to the region; Hans now constitute up to 40% of the XUAR population and 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 carried out large scale criminal arrests and intensive security measures in the XUAR, 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, and some experts argue that the PRC government has used counterterrorism as a pretext for carrying out forced assimilation policies and mass detentions.

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 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 a government campaign to forcefully reduce birth rates among Uyghurs.

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 and ubiquitous placement of surveillance cameras, collection of biometric data for identification purposes, and more intrusive monitoring of Internet use. The central government sent an estimated one million officials 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 between 1 million and 1.8 million Turkic and other Muslims, mostly Uyghurs and smaller numbers of ethnic Kazakhs and other groups, 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 as a condition for their release. According to some former detainees, treatment and conditions in the centers include factory labor, crowded and unsanitary conditions, food deprivation, psychological pressure, sexual abuse, and medical neglect and torture, sometimes resulting in deaths of detainees while in the camps or soon after their release.

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.

Forced Labor

The PRC government has pressured large numbers of Uyghurs, including former detainees, into accepting employment in the formal workforce, particularly in the textile, apparel, agricultural, consumer electronics, and other labor-intensive industries, in Xinjiang and other provinces. Uyghurs who refuse to accept such employment may be threatened with detention. Some factories utilizing Uyghur labor reportedly are tied to global supply chains. Factory employment often involves heavy surveillance and political indoctrination of Uyghurs.

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. The United States has to date publicly designated eight current or former PRC officials for sanctions in relation to human rights abuses in Xinjiang, pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818. E.O. 13818 implements and builds on the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328), which authorizes the President to impose economic and visa sanctions against foreign individuals or entities responsible for human rights violations or corruption. Among those designated is XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and two entities, the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a state-run paramilitary organization with major economic interests in the XUAR. The State Department also has announced visa restrictions against Xinjiang

officials and immediate family members pursuant to other authorities.

Import Restrictions. Since October 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) 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, CBP 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 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 Biden Administration has indicated concurrence with this determination.

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.

For further information, see CRS Report R46750, *Human Rights in China and U.S. Policy: Issues for the 117th Congress*.

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