



Briefing on Human Rights Conditions in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (2016-2020)

Submitted for the U.K. Conservative Party Human Rights Commission Inquiry into Human Rights in China 2016-2020

Uyghur Human Rights Project
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Summary:

Since the U.K. Conservative Party Human Rights Commission's last inquiry in 2016, Uyghurs and Turkic peoples in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) have experienced an alarming decline in the full range of internationally defined human rights standards. Uyghurs overseas, academics, legislators, government officials, and rights activists have labelled the current repression an existential threat to the Uyghur people and a probable genocide.

In its June 2016 report, the Commission noted that a broad range of Uyghur fundamental rights were under severe pressure. Two months after the Commission issued its report, the Chinese administration installed Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary of the XUAR. This move precipitated the human rights crisis currently underway in the region. The Chinese government mandated Chen to implement a series of measures with the aim of "stability maintenance." These measures include the shocking internment of up to 1.8 million individuals in a wide network of rapidly constructed camps. From leaked Chinese government documents, the selection of internees is arbitrary. As international awareness and concern grew about the internment campaign, the Chinese authorities diversified their repressive control into funneling Uyghurs and others into the carceral system at an alarming rate and forced labor.

Furthermore, the region has undergone a physical transformation from a homeland reflecting Uyghur cultural, economic and scientific achievements to the world's first technology-driven surveillance state. Mosques, shrines, and neighborhoods have been demolished and, in their place, a comprehensive grid of facial recognition cameras, checkpoints, and tourist simulacra have arisen. In conjunction with this monitoring of Uyghur movement, the Chinese authorities employed the enforced collection of biometric and communications data from residents.

Religious belief and practice are a pretext for internment. As such the exercise of these rights presents a potential risk to Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. The assault on religious freedoms forms part of an assimilative process underway in the Uyghur region. Along with the denial of creative freedom and linguistic rights, the cornerstones of a distinct Uyghur identity are under an existential threat. In addition, as this submission notes, the Chinese government's repressive measures do not stop at its borders.

Action on behalf of Uyghurs in the XUAR is required now. Governments, the private sector, non-governmental actors, and academia all have a role to play. However, states are in an influential

position to pressure China bilaterally and multilaterally to meet its international rights obligations. The UK can take domestic measures, such as augmented protection of Uyghurs overseas and leveraging sanctions on individuals and companies engaged in the construction of the Uyghur region's surveillance network, as well as regulating against materials and supplies made with forced labor. This report sets out four primary issues of concern with actionable recommendations for the UK government.

Primary Issues of Concern:

a. Religious Repression

Recommendations:

- Publicly and privately urge the Chinese government to respect, protect, and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief for all people in China.
- Push for an international fact-finding mission to assess the situation in the Uyghur region and report to the UN Human Rights Council.
- The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief should consider introducing a report on religious freedom in the Uyghur region.
- The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Religious Freedom in Xinjiang should investigate and monitor cases of human rights abuses including violations of the right to freedom of religious belief.
- The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief should advocate for the establishment of special mechanism through the UN to investigate abuses in the Uyghur region.

The Chinese government has, for decades, taken steps through law and policy to broadly coerce, control and restrict religious practice and prohibit that which is seen to undermine the state's authority. This constitutes, in many cases, state-sponsored religious discrimination prohibited in Chinese and international law.¹

More recently, China held a National Religious Work Conference in 2001 that set out principles including the inter-dependence between rights and obligations associated with religion, which stipulates factors by which the state may determine what activity is officially "lawful". Only when practitioners fulfill a certain set of fixed conditions can religious practice be considered lawful. China then introduced its Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA), a Decree of the State Council in 2005, maintaining that it is a requirement that religious groups register with the government and report on their religious activities.²

China convened its National Religious Work Conference once again in April 2016 and Xi Jinping became the first Party Secretary to attend since 2001, indicating the importance of this particular annual session.³ The meeting proved pivotal in consolidating Xi's efforts to fully 'Sinicize' religion, with a particular focus on issues relating to the Uyghur population following the passage of a revised version of the Xinjiang Regulations on Religious Affairs in 2014. By June 2016, the

Chinese government released a White Paper titled “Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang,” that asserts freedom of religion in the region “cannot be matched by that in any other historical period.”⁴ These claims have been central to China’s purposeful framing of the conditions on the ground as stable and harmonious.⁵

China completed deliberations over amendments to the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) as a result of the 2016 conference, which went into effect in February 2018. The Regulations extend greater powers to authorities in terms of oversight, as well as the ability of the government to shut down religious organizations outside its approval.⁶ The Regulations focus on the use of religion as a vessel for extremist or separatist tendencies, adds “extremism” as something to be guarded against in religious management, includes a more significant focus on the spread of religious content online,⁷ and adds greater focus to the role of religion in relation to schools,⁸ among other things.

This period coincided with a sharply aggressive approach on the ground towards China’s Muslim populations but hit Uyghurs particularly hard from the beginning. Prior to amendments to the RRA, China’s “Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism” in 2014 led to widespread arrests and sentencing, but also built on previous practices that tied religious practice directly to extremism and terrorism. The campaign was scaled up dramatically in 2016 by the newly appointed XUAR Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo, who followed the lead of Xi Jinping in cracking down on religious practice.

Under the guidance of the new Party Secretary, the Chinese government passed the Regulation on “De-extremification,” which went into force in 2017. Under the Regulation, signs of “extremification” include wearing clothing with face coverings, growing “irregular beards,” bearing symbols of “extremification,” publishing or possessing information with “extremist content,” and giving children “Islamic” names.⁹ In late 2018, a group of UN Experts sent a Joint Letter to the Chinese government, calling for the repeal of the Regulation and expressing deep concern for the overbroad definition of “extremification,” noting that “the homogenization of society and the aim to make “religion more Chinese” are not considered legitimate aims under international human rights law.¹⁰

Since then, these national and regional policies as well as their implementation on the local level have led to the prohibition of several significant elements of Islamic practice. These elements of practice include a ban on facial hair or clothing that is interpreted to “disseminate religious extremist ideologies”; requirements that all Hajj be organized by the state; a requirement that the use of “halal” be restricted to only certain food products; the prohibition on the creation, possession, consumption, and dissemination of media that may be broadly defined by the state as promoting extremism; a ban on religion at all levels of education; and a ban on children participating in religious activities.¹¹ The destruction of a significant number of physical places of worship and symbols of Islam such as mosques and shrines has also been reported.¹²

Since mid-2017, religious expression and practices have now been inextricably linked to the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in political indoctrination camps. Religious expression and practice emerged as one of the primary criteria for detention based on several reports.^{13,14} In 2018, reports from the region indicate that all Uyghurs are afraid to participate in any religious activities for fear of arbitrary detention.

Taken together in 2020, the myriad restrictions directly threaten the future of Islam as a basis for Uyghur cultural identity. Religious expression and practice has been reduced to hollow religious displays, highly supervised by the state.¹⁵ The existing threat of arbitrary detention for all Muslims in the region for unauthorized religious practices, coupled with concrete legislation explicitly banning such expression, means that Uyghurs are not able to take part in any meaningful expression of their religious identity.

According to Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution, “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.”¹⁶ The article goes on to explain that the state “protects normal religious activities” and that “[n]o one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order.” The latter two clauses can be seen as the basis for broad discretion in the state’s interpretation of the law. State protection is provided to “normal religious activities” without clarifying or qualifying the phrase.

China has only weakly signaled its intent to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which also ensures the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.”¹⁷ The ICCPR also upholds a person’s right to religious belief, “either individually or in community with others and in public or private” and prohibits state or non-state organs from compelling citizens to believe or not believe in any religion.¹⁸

b. Chinese Government Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas (Including the U.K.)

Recommendations:

- Take immediate steps to ensure that Uyghur asylum seekers in the UK are protected and follow the lead of the migration agencies of Germany and Sweden by publicly announcing that Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples will not be returned to China.
- Ensure that Uyghurs living on short-term residency permits have the right over time to apply for long-term residency in the UK.
- Take immediate steps to ensure that dissidents and Uyghurs residing in the UK are protected against retaliation from the Chinese government and invoke domestic law as appropriate.

The Chinese government has for years engaged in a campaign of intimidation and espionage against the Uyghur diaspora around the world. This campaign has escalated since 2017, as various representatives of the Chinese government have threatened to throw family members in the Uyghur Region into various forms of detention. UHRP has extensively documented the Chinese government’s harassment and espionage against the Uyghur community, including internationally,¹⁹ and its recent more aggressive campaign’s effect on Uyghurs in the United States.²⁰

The Chinese government has a long history of targeting dissidents abroad and tends to view Uyghurs as an inherently suspicious group. The state suspicion of Uyghurs has only worsened in recent years, as officials have used individuals’ connection to or communication with family or friends abroad as pretenses for detention.²¹

A coordinated attempt by the Chinese government to force Uyghurs to return from overseas in the middle of 2017 was one of the first hints the international community had of the massive

escalation in repression in the Uyghur homeland of East Turkistan. Authorities pressured Uyghur students studying in universities around the world to return home for ideological assessment; in many cases those were disappeared²² or detained immediately after their return to China, and some even died in custody.²³

One of the main ways that the Chinese authorities carry out their campaign of intimidation is by contacting Uyghurs via phone or messaging apps such as WeChat. The callers often identify themselves as Chinese security officers, often from the hometown of the Uyghurs they are contacting. The callers often attempt to use family members in China as leverage to attempt to extract information from the target or to force their cooperation in committing espionage against the Uyghur community. Police and other officials also sometimes forced Uyghurs in China to call their overseas family members from police stations and tell them they must cease speaking out lest their families suffer the consequences.²⁴ Records show numerous cases in which parents in the Uyghur homeland have asked their children abroad to delete any political opinions they may have posted online, and not to speak out about their family members' disappearance and persecution.²⁵ Chinese police have called Uyghurs demanding their home, school, and work addresses; photos; and scans of their Chinese or foreign ID cards and passports, as well as those of their spouses. This has happened to Uyghurs around the world: reports from France, Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, and Germany document Uyghurs who have been asked to give information or cease speaking out.²⁶

The goal of this systematic harassment is to silence the Uyghur diaspora, an attempt to stop them from organizing to advocate for Uyghur rights and in some cases to prevent them from enjoying the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by democratic nations. The harassment constitutes a brazen effort by the Chinese government to interfere in the lives of Uyghur citizens, permanent residents, and students residing in free countries. It serves to replicate the system of control which exists in the Uyghur homeland on foreign soil.

Countries such as the UK should regard efforts to recruit Uyghurs to spy on other Uyghurs using threats against their families as crimes. The U.K. should also counter the activities of the Chinese security services and protect Uyghurs living in diaspora communities. Several European governments have found that the monitoring of dissident groups constitutes espionage. The German ministry of the Interior stated that “a substantial part of the spying activities in Germany is directed against” dissident groups including Uyghurs.²⁷ The General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands reported that the Chinese authorities take an interest in ethnic minorities overseas and that “Uyghurs, in particular, are tightly monitored and even put under pressure to collect information about other members of their community. Chinese agents have attempted to infiltrate Uyghur organisations in the Netherlands, and China has very detailed knowledge of their internal affairs.”²⁸ The Swedish authorities take what they call “refugee espionage” seriously: the Security Service’s website describes it as unlawful intelligence activity and political persecution, warning that it may “undermine the democratic process, and lead to a situation where people who have sought asylum in our country may no longer feel able to enjoy their constitutional rights and freedoms.”²⁹ Several cases of espionage against the Uyghur community have resulted in prosecutions, including in Sweden and Germany.³⁰

One UK-based Uyghur has told UHRP that members of the Uyghur community have openly told him that they are reporting to the Chinese government.³¹ One Uyghur activist in the UK has

presented evidence to the House of Commons on that her family has faced retaliation for her advocacy and that she has suffered from being cut off from communication with them,³² while others have asked the UK government to pressure the Chinese government to release their family members.³³ However, fear of reprisal against their family members makes many Uyghur reluctant to share their stories.

c. Detention, Forced Labor, and Incarceration

Recommendations:

- Publicly and privately urge the Chinese government at the highest levels to end mass, arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples.
- Publicly and privately call on the Chinese government to make public the charges against prominent Uyghurs including Yalqun Rozi, Tashpolat Tiyp, Rashida Dawut, and Abidin Ayup, among others.
- Consider Magnitsky-style targeted sanctions, such as those currently in development by the UK government, and other visa protocols, against Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and other senior officials linked to abuses in the Uyghur region.
- Take steps to encourage the Chinese government to ratify the Convention on Forced Labour, the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, and the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention.
- Urge British companies with operations in the Uyghur region and across China to adopt explicit policies in support of human rights and establish procedures to ensure that their operations do not result in, or contribute to, human rights abuses, including forced labor.

As noted above, Uyghurs have been a target of Chinese state repression and discrimination for decades. Since the second half of 2016, however, this repression has intensified, arguably far beyond levels seen even in the Cultural Revolution (c. 1968–78). In 2016, Chen Quanguo, then the newly appointed Party secretary of the XUAR, began to “upscale” the draconian security and anti-terrorism measures that had been piloted by Zhang Chunxian, his immediate predecessor.³⁴ For example, one aspect of the upscaling included the implementation of “grid-style” policing and social management, consisting of extensive systems of both electronic and human surveillance.³⁵ Chen also launched a campaign against “two-faced” elites; the term “two-faced” refers to people who are suspected of exhibiting disloyalty to the Chinese Communist Party.³⁶ Prominent Uyghurs accused of being “two-faced” have been detained, arrested, and in some cases even sentenced to life imprisonment or death.³⁷

Since 2017 Chen has perhaps most notably orchestrated the **extrajudicial, extralegal detention** of upwards of 1.8 million Uyghurs in “re-education” camps that he has designed to “teach like a school, be managed like the military, and be defended like a prison.”³⁸ Eyewitness and survivor testimonies by Uyghur and Kazakh individuals such as Gulbahar Jelilova,³⁹ Sayragul Sayutbay,⁴⁰ Omer Bekali,⁴¹ Mehriqul Tursun,⁴² and Zumrat Dawut⁴³ have attested to the fact that the camps are centers for ideological education and cultural assimilation, and that authorities working in the camps

have subjected internees to various forms of physical and emotional torture. In Chen’s own words, cited in an internal memo in a Kashgar government document, the purpose of the camps is to “break [Uyghurs’] lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins.”⁴⁴ The camps by far receive the greatest attention in international press coverage of the Uyghur crisis.

Forced labor is also a central part of the Chen-led crackdown on the XUAR’s Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other groups. This forced labor scheme recently gained wide international attention after the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) published a report documenting the use of Uyghur forced labor in factories connected to at least 83 global companies, including Nike, Apple, and Heinz, producing a wide variety of the world’s garments, electronics, and other goods in March 2020.⁴⁵ Earlier research by Adrian Zenz has shown that XUAR authorities have long been “graduating” internees into factories while also conscripting non-interred Uyghurs from the rural south into various “flows” for forced labor, with the ultimate goal of turning the entire region into a hub for cheap labor under pretenses of a “poverty alleviation” program.⁴⁶ Upon completion of their internment, Uyghurs and others are sent to work in factories for a penance. Survivors describe poor labor conditions, including low wages and abuse by superiors.⁴⁷

However, policymakers and other observers of this crisis must understand that the Chinese state’s campaign against Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim peoples in the XUAR extends far beyond camps and forced labor, and that the authorities appear to be **funneling Uyghurs and others into the carceral system** at an alarming rate. Over the past three years, authorities have massively ramped up prison sentences in the XUAR. In August 2019, an investigation by reporters from the *New York Times* showed that while the XUAR accounts for less than 2% of the PRC’s population, in 2017 it accounted for 21% of arrests in the entire country.⁴⁸ Prison sentences appear to have increased in number since then. Testimonies from a number of Uyghur relatives living in diaspora, along with investigative reporting by Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur service and other news outlets, have revealed that XUAR courts have meted out excessively long prison terms to a number of Uyghur intellectual and cultural elites, including education bureaucrat and writer Yalqun Rozi, who received 15 years in 2016;⁴⁹ Xinjiang University president and academic geographer Tashpolat Tiyyip, who was given a two-year deferred death sentence in 2017;⁵⁰ singer Rashida Dawut, who received 15 years on charges of separatism in December 2019;⁵¹ and 90-year-old Artush imam Abidin Ayup, who was charged with religious extremism.⁵² A sentencing document leaked as part of the China Cables and published in November 2019 also describes the case of a brick factory laborer whom authorities sentenced to 10 years in 2018 for “ideological crimes” that included telling his co-workers not to curse or watch pornography.⁵³

d. Deployment of Surveillance Technologies

Recommendations:

- Impose appropriate export control mechanisms to deny the Chinese government, and Chinese companies enabling government abuses, access to technologies used to violate basic rights, particularly in the surveillance sector.
- Consider expanding the UK export licencing policy for China to include technology and equipment that may be used to repress the Uyghur population, in line with the U.S. Department of Commerce’s addition of 28 Chinese organizations to its “entities list.”

- Reassess the UK’s Department for International Trade’s relationship with Chinese companies involved in the development of artificial intelligence systems, including SenseTime.
- Urge British companies involved in the sale of surveillance technology to the Chinese government to conduct human rights due diligence to assess the impact of their products on religious and ethnic minorities.
- Ensure that institutions like universities and research organizations do not engage with Chinese police departments, security agencies, or Chinese technology companies linked to human rights abuses against Turkic Muslims.

Scholar Adrian Zenz calls East Turkistan a “frontline laboratory for surveillance.”⁵⁴ Since 2016, the Chinese government has developed new surveillance technologies in the region to serve two purposes: (1) to command unprecedented knowledge over the lives of individuals and communities, and (2) to build products and expertise for profitable export. The first of these purposes operates as a means of enforcing the totality of state control in East Turkistan. The second represents a threat to international human-rights standards as authoritarian governments purchase sophisticated surveillance technologies.⁵⁵ Beijing enlists state media to promote a narrative that demonstrates the effectiveness of these surveillance technologies. Outlets such as Xinhua and The Global Times note how these systems have “stabilized” conditions in East Turkistan.⁵⁶ This discourse aims to normalize the excessive intrusiveness of novel digital surveillance systems while advertising China’s technological capacity to other states.

Digital surveillance in East Turkistan includes (1) biometric, (2) communicative, and (3) spatial forms. *Biometric*: Between 2016 and 2017, Chinese authorities conducted a “Physicals for All” campaign, which took DNA samples, iris scans, and other biometric data from Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. A further program of “health checks,” expected of all adults, coercively collected fingerprints, voice signatures, and face signatures.⁵⁷ The gathering of this data has enabled state authorities to link individuals with unique identifiers. *Communicative*: All internet activity in East Turkistan has been closely monitored since the 2009 unrest in Ürümchi (Urumqi).⁵⁸ However, in 2018, Uyghurs were required to download an app to their phones, which “records a phone’s identifying information, including its IMEI number, model, phone number, and manufacturer.”⁵⁹ The app also “searches through the phone for unique, fingerprintlike identifiers associated with files, particularly photos, audio recordings, and videos.”⁶⁰ Personal devices and communications are scanned for religious imagery, incoherent speech, or “suspicious” sentiments.⁶¹ Apps or communication tools that could connect Uyghurs to the outside world are grounds enough to be sent to internment camps.⁶² *Spatial*: By 2020, China aims to make its “video surveillance network ‘omnipresent, fully networked, always working and fully controllable.’”⁶³ However, in East Turkistan, by 2018, the presence of “high-resolution cameras and facial recognition technology [was] ubiquitous.”⁶⁴ In 2016, 160,000 surveillance cameras were installed in Ürümchi,⁶⁵ and a 2018 report noted a network of 40,000 facial recognition cameras in operation,⁶⁶ 1,000 of which would be installed inside the region’s mosques.⁶⁷ These three elements of surveillance are made more effective through the deployment of the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, or IJOP (一体化联合作战平台). The IJOP collects a vast array of microdata, including such details as electricity use, participation in flag-raising ceremonies, and ownership of exercise equipment, to build a composite picture of individuals. As facial recognition cameras recognize an individual, their movements and

actions are linked to a biometric profile including blood type, fingerprints, irises, and DNA analysis; all digital communications—spoken, written, or even merely read—are also accessible to the system.⁶⁸

Digital surveillance is complemented by time-tested forms of relational surveillance to monitor individual behaviors. Community surveillance, such as reporting “suspicious” actions of friends, family, and neighbors, remains a feature of daily life in East Turkistan.⁶⁹ Party cadres have also enlisted children into relational surveillance, such as informing on parents’ or other family members’ religious activities.⁷⁰ This intra-community surveillance is accompanied by another form of in-person intelligence work. In December 2017 Human Rights Watch described how “Xinjiang authorities mobilized more than a million cadres to spend a week living in homes primarily in the countryside” through the “Becoming Family” policy. During these “visits,” cadres gather information on political loyalties, as well as the smallest details of everyday life disclosing an external affinity, such as belief in Islam. Relational surveillance has profound impacts creating an atmosphere of mutual distrust between individuals and the disintegration of communal networks. However, the Chinese government has integrated these human-centered forms of intelligence gathering into its novel digital surveillance. Party cadre observations on behavior gathered during “Becoming Family” visits provide an additional source of information for the IJOP.⁷¹

In October 2018, the U.S. Department of Commerce placed eight Chinese commercial enterprises on the “entities list,” including Dahua Technology; Hikvision; IFLYTEK; Megvii Technology; Sense Time; Xiamen Meiya Pico Information Co. Ltd.; Yitu Technologies; and Yixin Science and Technology Co. Ltd.⁷² These companies were found to be “implicated in human rights violations and abuses in the implementation of China’s campaign of repression, mass arbitrary detention, and high-technology surveillance against Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other members of Muslim minority groups.”⁷³ The listing of these entities blocks them from purchasing U.S.-made products. U.S. companies Amazon, Apple, and Google have faced criticism for distributing goods and apps from Hikvision, Dahua Technology, and iFlytek since the announcement.⁷⁴ Furthermore, U.S. companies “Seagate Technology PLC, Western Digital Corp., Intel Corp. and Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co., have nurtured, courted and profited from China’s surveillance industry.”⁷⁵ There are a reported 1.2 million Hikvision security cameras in the UK.⁷⁶ In 2016, Hikvision purchased the Sheffield-based burglar alarm company Pyronix.⁷⁷ In January 2020, Graham Stuart, a minister at the Department for International Trade, met representatives from SenseTime “to discuss the use of artificial intelligence and data in higher education.”⁷⁸

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