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China Primer: Uyghurs

Uyghurs (also spelled “Uighurs”) are a Muslim ethnic minority group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the far northwest of the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China). They have garnered the attention of U.S. policymakers, particularly since 2018 following reports of the mass internment of Uyghurs in “reeducation” centers. The facilities were part of an ongoing government effort to systematically transform the thought and behavior of Uyghurs and forcefully assimilate them into PRC society, which some observers say is destroying 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 that 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. PRC officials refer to Xinjiang as a “core hub” for China’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 Xinjiang; they now make up less than half of the region’s population of 26 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 42% of the XUAR population and the majority in Urumqi, the regional capital. Since 2017, the Xinjiang government has carried out a campaign to forcefully reduce birth rates or “illegal births” among Uyghurs and other minority groups.

Since an outbreak of Uyghur demonstrations and interethnic 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.

Forced Assimilation

Since 2017, in tandem with a 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. Some experts contend the PRC government has used counterterrorism as a pretext for carrying out assimilation policies and mass detentions in Xinjiang. 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 have been closed, demolished, or “Sinicized,” whereby Islamic motifs and Arabic writings have been removed. The Xinjiang government has placed nearly half a million Uyghur and other minority children in state-run boarding schools, and has banned the use of Uyghur language in instruction in all schools in the XUAR.

Mass Internment

Between 2017 and 2019, XUAR authorities, at the behest of Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, arbitrarily detained over 1 million ethnic Uyghur and other Muslims in reeducation centers. Detainees generally were not accused of crimes, but rather were held on the basis of past religious, cultural, scholarly, social, and online activities, as well as foreign travel, that the government later deemed “extremist,” “pre-criminal,” or potentially terrorist. Detainees were compelled to renounce many of their Islamic beliefs and customs as a condition for their release. Treatment in the centers reportedly included food deprivation, psychological pressure, sexual abuse, medical neglect, torture, and forced labor. Leaked Xinjiang police files, which included thousands of detainee records and images, important party directives, and police protocols, revealed the prison-like nature of the reeducation centers.

Since 2019, the XUAR government appears to have released some detainees, prosecuted many as criminals, and sent others to work as factory labor. Many forms of political indoctrination continue in homes and factories. Some reeducation centers appear to have been converted to high-security prisons and new prisons have been built. In 2022, the XUAR government reported it had prosecuted 540,826 people since 2017; human rights groups presume many were Uyghurs charged with political crimes. More than 300 Uyghur intellectuals and cultural figures are believed to be detained or serving prison sentences. Among Uyghur intellectuals handed long sentences for state security crimes are Ilham Tohti (convicted in 2014), an economics professor who had maintained a website related to Uyghur issues, and Rahile Dawut, a scholar of Uyghur folklore who was convicted in September 2023. Both were found guilty of “separatism” and sentenced to life in prison.

In August 2022, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights determined that China’s counterterrorism and counter-“extremism” strategies have led to “interlocking patterns of severe and undue restrictions on a wide range of human rights” and may constitute crimes against humanity. It called on China to “release all individuals arbitrarily deprived of their liberty” and “urgently repeal” all discriminatory laws and policies against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the XUAR.

Forced Labor

The PRC government has pressured many Uyghurs, including former detainees, into accepting employment in textile, apparel, agricultural, consumer electronics, and other labor-intensive industries, in Xinjiang and other provinces. Some factories utilizing Uyghur labor are tied to global supply chains. Uyghurs who refuse to accept such employment may face detention or other penalties.

Selected U.S. Responses

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 concurred with this determination. The State Department’s annual human rights report on China covering 2022 describes these crimes as “continuing.”

Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act. On June 17, 2020, then-President Trump signed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-145) into law. The act aims to impose sanctions on PRC officials determined to be responsible for human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. The act also mandated a number of reports from the executive branch on subjects including the extent of human rights violations and abuses in Xinjiang, the implications for U.S. security and economic interests, and 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 and Investment Restrictions. The United States has to date publicly designated 10 current or

former PRC officials for sanctions in relation to human rights abuses in Xinjiang pursuant to Executive Order 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328). Among those designated is former XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. Also designated are 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 their immediate family members pursuant to other authorities. Separately, the Treasury Department has imposed restrictions on U.S. investments in certain PRC companies involved in the surveillance and tracking of religious and ethnic minorities in China.

Export Controls. Since October 2019, the Commerce Department has added approximately 70 companies and public security entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) “entity list” under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) due to their connection to human rights abuses or repression in Xinjiang. A number of other PRC entities have also been added, due in whole or in part, to their connection to human rights abuses in China. 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.

Forced Labor Import Restrictions. From 2019 to 2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) issued a series of announcements blocking the import of goods suspected of involving Xinjiang-related forced labor pursuant to the forced labor import ban under Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930. In December 2021, Congress passed and President Biden signed into law P.L. 117-78, popularly referred to as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA). Among other provisions, the law creates a presumption that goods produced or manufactured in Xinjiang, or by entities with certain ties to Xinjiang, are made with forced labor, unless CBP affirmatively determines otherwise. Pursuant to the UFLPA, this “rebuttable presumption” went into effect on June 21, 2022.

East Turkestan Islamic Movement

The PRC government has attributed some past deadly incidents in the XUAR since the 1990s 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 (TEL). Since 2017, the U.S. government has noted a lack of credible evidence supporting ETIM’s continued presence, and stated in 2022 that it “has not seen clear and convincing evidence of ETIM’s existence.” In 2020, the Trump Administration removed ETIM from the TEL. United Nations sanctions monitors differ in their assessment, reporting that in 2022, ETIM had a presence in Afghanistan and Syria.

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

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