

WHEN HUMAN RIGHTS, NATIONAL IDENTITY, ETHNICITY, AND RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION COLLIDE

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ABSTRACT

As it is difficult to ascertain who might be guilty of the thought crime of harboring feelings of East Turkistani national identity, Uyghurs and other ethnically-Turkic people in the region have been targeted on the basis of their religion and ethnicity. The Chinese government sees the idea that Uyghurs and other ethnically-Turkic people in the region might retain their separate national identity, viewing themselves as separate from the Chinese super-state, as a crucial national security threat. It is important to note that East Turkistan (what China calls “Xinjiang”) sits at the corner of stone of China’s Belt and Road Initiative for global economic supremacy and is a vast resource rich-strategic region serving as a gateway to Central Asia and the West. As democratic nations attempt to grapple with this urgent human rights crisis, it is vital that human rights advocates and policy makers frame this issue in its most accurate terms by understanding the geopolitical factors and history of this oppression.

KEYWORDS

East Turkistan | Uyghur | Muslims | Human rights | Religious freedom | China | Xinjiang | BRI | Global Security

Few international observers have ever heard of “East Turkistan”. If they have heard of it, they have probably only heard it called Xinjiang, China. And therein lies the issue at the heart of this crisis.

East Turkistan is the name Turkic peoples traditionally use to refer to their homeland. Since 1949, East Turkistan’s inhabitants have viewed our homeland as being under a de facto state of military occupation by Chinese Communist forces. Before that time, we had a sovereign, independent nation. In fact, over the past century, we have had two separate East Turkistan Republics. Our homeland has a separate ethnic identity as well. Its native inhabitants are Turkic peoples who are culturally and ethnically distinct from China’s ethnic Han majority. Because of our separate ethnicity, and because of our long history of having a distinct culture, we have harbored a separate identity, dating back to ancient times.

Since May of 2014, in the aftermath of an attack at Urumchi’s south railway station which left three dead, China’s Communist Party authorities have accelerated an unprecedented, official campaign to deprive our people of our human rights.¹ After the attacks, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, “The battle to combat violence and terrorism will not allow even a moment of slackness, and decisive actions must be taken to resolutely suppress the terrorists’ rampant momentum.”²

This campaign is characterised by totalitarian levels of surveillance, forced brainwashing in “re-education and vocation training centers,” involuntary work in labour camps, long sentences in traditional prisons, the destruction of mosques, the erasure of the Uyghur language, and numerous other violations of human rights. There are even reports of forced marriages of Uyghur women to ethnically-Han Chinese men, as well as reports of torture in these modern-day concentration camps.

Some reports state that praying, wearing a hijab, going to a mosque, traveling abroad (for instance, on Hajj pilgrimage), listening to a religious lecture, having a full beard, abstaining from alcohol, and performing a traditional funeral are all grounds for being arrested.³

In fact, over one hundred members of my immediate and extended family have been arrested. Three have died in these camps, allegedly after having been beaten. My family has no way of knowing precisely what happened, and because the bodies are immediately cremated, grieving families, such as mine, are callously deprived of the opportunity to view the bodies of our loved ones or bury them according to our religious and cultural customs.

Chinese authorities characterise this campaign, which was unveiled in 2012 and which they call the “Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism” campaign, as one targeting what the Chinese state calls the “3 evils,” namely “separatism, extremism, and terrorism.”⁴ In international media, this is often simplified as being a campaign based on religious or ethnic persecution, and certainly there are elements of that, but for a more complete understanding of this oppression, its necessary to explore what the Chinese authorities mean when they delineate these “3 evils.”

Extremism and terrorism are concepts that are self-explanatory to most readers, but the truth is that there are very few instances of religious extremism or large-scale terrorism inside East Turkistan (or what China calls Xinjiang). Those few misguided souls who do subscribe to such ideologies have typically left East Turkistan for foreign battlefields. That leaves “separatism,” and this is the real false pretext for the persecution that is currently happening in East Turkistan. Our separate national identity, rooted in our separate ethnic identity, is the basis of the Chinese Communist Party’s allegations of separatism.

Because it is difficult to ascertain who might be guilty of the thought crime of harboring feelings of East Turkistani national identity, Uyghurs and other ethnically-Turkic people in the region (including ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tatars) have been targeted on the basis of our religion and ethnicity. But make no mistake, the real goal of this human-rights violating campaign is to eradicate all feelings of an East Turkistani national identity.

Why is the Chinese Communist Party so hell-bent on eradicating East Turkistani national identity? In the past, these authorities were content to let us live in relative peace. Throughout China’s Cultural Revolution, Uyghurs were placed into Maoist re-education camps, but never at the scale or with the brutality seen today. Only in the past decades have the Chinese Communist authorities begun to behave in such a ruthless fashion, and the reason for this is actually a simple matter of geopolitics.

Our homeland of East Turkistan is rich in natural resources – like oil, gold, and uranium – that China will need in coming decades. Moreover, it sits as a cornerstone in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). East Turkistan is key railway conduit into Central Asia, part of China’s ancient “Silk Road.” It also sits at the center of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In short, for Chinese Communist authorities, the idea that Uyghurs and other ethnically-Turkic people in the region might retain their separate national identity, viewing themselves as separate from the Chinese super-state, is completely untenable. To eradicate this idea of East Turkistan, the Communist authorities are willing to violate our human rights including our right to worship freely in any way they deem necessary, and they are doing precisely that.

As democratic nations attempt to grapple with this urgent human rights crisis, it is vital that human rights advocates frame this issue in its most accurate terms. In particular, we ask that nations in the Global South begin to acknowledge that we view ourselves as East Turkistanis rather than Uyghurs from Xinjiang or Chinese Uyghurs or even Chinese Muslims. We do not view ourselves as Chinese. It is also imperative that nations in the Global South, particular Muslim-majority nations, explain the history of this oppression. Without educating the world about East Turkistan, the world will never understand the basis of this crisis.

NOTES

1 • “Eradicating Ideological Viruses’ - China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims,” Human Rights Watch, 2018, accessed August 15, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/china0918_web.pdf.

2 • “Xinjiang Station Attack: President Xi Jinping Urges Action,” BBC, May 1, 2014, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27232924>.

3 • “48 Ways to Get Sent to a Chinese Concentration Camp,” Foreign Policy, September 13, 2018, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/13/48-ways-to-get-sent-to-a-chinese-concentration-camp/>.

4 • “Xinjiang to Crack Down on ‘Three Evil Forces,’” China Daily, March 6, 2012, accessed August 15, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/06/content_14766900.htm.



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