

A Campaign Against Culture? China's Systematic Repression of Islam
A Discussion Guide for Chinese Treatment of the Uighurs
Guide Last Updated: January, 2020



<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uighurs-xinjiang>

China and Islam

Early in the rule of President Xi Jinping, China initiated a campaign of cultural repression towards Muslim minority groups across the country. The most visible actions are centered in the northwest province of Xinjiang, which contains 11 million Muslim Uighur people. President Xi has also cracked down on other ethnic groups including Muslim Kazakhs and Uzbeks. China appears to be moving to Sinicize, or co-opt religion, to strengthen the authoritarian grip of the Chinese Communist Party on Chinese life. Xi frequently justifies China's anti-Muslim policies

by tying Muslim religious practices to Islamist Extremism, the East Turkestan Separatist Movement, and international and domestic terrorism.

The Case of the Uighurs

The Uighurs are a Turkic speaking ethnic minority that make up 45% of the population of Xinjiang. Since at least 2014, these Muslim citizens have faced systematic religious repression, which intensified when Chen Quanguo, a CCP official responsible for a massive scale-up in security and surveillance of Tibetan Buddhists, was nominated as party secretary for Xinjiang. Xi and Chen's policies include biometric surveillance with facial recognition technology, "homestays" by government officials to report back on "extremist" activities such as fasting during Ramadan, prohibition of long beards and veils in public, demolition of dozens of mosques and holy sites, and constant monitoring of online activities. In 2019, government documents were released indicating a massive increase in the number of "re-education" camps for Muslims. In practice, individuals and sometimes entire families are regularly detained for minor offenses such as sending texts with Quranic verses. The Chinese government originally denied the existence of these camps, and still maintains that they are "vocational training centers [to educate and rehabilitate] people guilty of minor crimes or law-breaking and [eradicate] the influence of terrorism and extremism." However, escaped or former detainees have described extensive abuses that occur within, including forced renunciation of Islam, sleep deprivation, water torture, beating, forced abortions, and sexual assault.

Global Response

Over the summer, two dozen countries (most of which are European), signed a condemnation of China's activities in Xinjiang. In response, a group of mostly Muslim countries—many with significant economic ties to China—signed a letter praising Xi's human rights advances and reduction of terrorism. Turkey is one of the only Muslim-majority nations to have condemned China's Xinjiang activities, but Prime Minister Erdogan didn't raise the issue when he visited Beijing this summer for economic and political discussions. A major artery of China's Belt and Road Initiative, a massive economic undertaking to develop and connect China with the rest of Asia and Europe, lies in Xinjiang. Turkey, along with many other developing Muslim countries, has much to gain economically from involvement with this project. High-ranking U.S. officials have strongly condemned China's human rights violations, but Trump has prioritized economics, not human rights, during his negotiations with Xi.

Timeline

- **1949:** Chinese Communist Party takes power
- **2001, September 11:** Terror attacks in NYC lead Chinese government to join the Global War on Terror and fight separatism, religious extremism, and international terrorism

- **2009, July:** A Uighur protest in the capital of Xinjiang turns violent and involves Han civilians and CCP police. Around 200 people die
- **2011:** Thousands of Uighurs move to Syria to fight for various militant groups, including ISIS, in the civil war
- **2013, March 14:** Xi Jinping takes power
- **2014:** Reeducation efforts begin; Xi makes secret speeches in Xinjiang warning of the “toxicity of religious extremism”
- **2016:** There are no terrorist attacks in Xinjiang from 2016 to present, which the government points to as an indicator of their policies’ success
- **2017, March:** Veils and beards are prohibited in public; centers are now officially used to eliminate extremism
- **2017, April:** Chinese officials begin detaining Muslim citizens en masse; between 800,000 and 2,000,000 have been incarcerated since this date
- **2019, November:** The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists reports that in a single week, 15,000 Uighurs were placed in detention centers after being flagged by the surveillance algorithm.

Questions to Consider

Is China’s repression of minority cultures and oppression of minority people genocidal in intent, effect, or both?

How can China address the real or perceived threat of Islamist terrorism in a more humane way?

Should the U.S., Muslim countries, and the international community act on this matter? If so, how should each respond?

Is Xi’s anti-minority sentiment part of a global trend of nationalism, or is it different?

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