

Statement Prepared for the
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight

Hearing on

The Uyghurs: A History of Persecution

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Thank you. In my remarks, I'll provide a brief introduction to the Uyghurs and to the area today known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is located within the northwest borders of the People's Republic of China. It occupies 1/6th of China's total territory, is a resource-rich area, and borders eight countries. Its population today is roughly 21 million, according to official Chinese statistics.

The Uyghurs—the main indigenous ethnic group in the region—are a Turkic ethnic group that share cultural ties with Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and other Central Asian populations, as well as with the Turks of Turkey. The Uyghurs are Sunni Muslim and speak a language related to Turkish. As such facts suggest, the Uyghurs have a distinct culture and history that is different from the Chinese.

The Uyghurs' home—what is today designated as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region by the Chinese government—is often noted as a crossroads of Asia and hub on the old Silk Road, and this location helps explain the region's complex history. The government of the People's Republic of China, however, politicizes and simplifies the region's history to justify its current control of the area. The Chinese government today says the region has been “an inseparable part” of China for millennia. The reality is far different. Ruling powers in China before the PRC had varying degrees of interaction with, and in some periods, a degree of control over, the region. For much of their history, Uyghurs experienced their own patterns of political rule apart from China.

The Qing dynasty rulers of China conquered the region in the mid-18th century and later designated it as Xinjiang province in 1884, but control by the Qing and its successors was often tenuous, well into the 20th century. In the 1930s and 1940s local ethnic groups declared two independent republics in the region.

Communist forces took control of Xinjiang in 1949, and in 1955, the PRC government designated the region as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. This designation means Xinjiang is like a Chinese province but in addition, is entitled to special legislative

powers to allow, in theory, for more autonomy in governance and special protections for ethnic minority populations. In reality, there are strong limits to this autonomy system, to the extent that we see the exact opposite of autonomy in Xinjiang.

Since the PRC took control of Xinjiang, it has left a strong imprint in the region. As a result of state migration policies, Han Chinese—the main ethnic group in China—now constitute at least 40% of the region’s population, up from around 6% in the early 1950s. Uyghurs, who were 75% of the population in the 1950s, are now around 45%, according to official Chinese statistics. The remaining 15% of the population is a mix of other ethnic groups.

In addition to engineering demographic shifts, we have seen other longstanding policies to promote assimilation, remake aspects of Uyghur ethnic and religious identity to conform with state goals, and punish peaceful forms of dissent and other forms of expression. After the Cultural Revolution, there was some leeway to develop and express Uyghur identity in the 1980s, but repression in the region has worsened since the 1990s. The PRC gained momentum to further tighten controls after 9/11.

To end, let me discuss a few of the reasons why we see this level of repression. It’s important to remember that the region is historically and culturally quite distinct from China, as the Uyghurs themselves are distinct from the Han Chinese. That the region is today a part of China reflects, among other factors, the strength of the Chinese Communists in 1949 rather than the democratic will of the Uyghur people. Given these circumstances, the Chinese government sees the region—and certain assertions of ethnic and religious identity—as a potential source for separatist movements that could challenge Chinese control or lead to “instability.” As China watched Central Asian republics emerge in the 1990s, these fears became particularly acute. As I noted, Xinjiang is a resource-rich area, and for this and many other reasons, China wants to hold onto it.

As for the nature of this stated separatist movement, Xinjiang specialists who’ve looked at available information have questioned the presence of a real and vigorous separatist movement inside China, but the Chinese government nonetheless perceives the threat. Of course, with the Chinese government’s track record of manipulating data on terrorist attacks, conflating peaceful expression and religious activity with separatist acts, and imposing barriers to freedom of press, it can be quite difficult to get an accurate picture of the separatist threat claimed by the Chinese government. What is clear, however, is the nature and scope of Chinese government repression in the region. I’d like to thank the Subcommittee and refer listeners to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China Web site for more information on conditions for Uyghurs and for access to the CECC Political Prisoner Database, which contains records of Uyghurs imprisoned for exercising their fundamental human rights.