

**United States Commission on International Religious Freedom:  
Rising Anti-Muslim Hatred: FoRB Violations Against Muslims Abroad**

Testimony of Jewher Ilham  
Forced Labor Project Manager, Worker Rights Consortium

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I would like to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to testify. My name is Jewher Ilham, and I am Uyghur.

I am here today to testify about the human rights abuses my people have faced for years in China because of our faith and identity. I was born and raised as a Uyghur Muslim in Beijing. Yet, ironically, my first time holding a copy of the Quran, and my first time stepping foot inside a mosque, was in the United States in the summer of 2013. That was a few months after my father and I were forcibly separated at the Beijing International Airport. Chinese authorities prevented my father, Ilham Tohti, a renowned Uyghur economist from boarding the plane. That was the last time I saw him. I was 18 years old.

Soon after, my father Ilham Tohti was imprisoned for advocating for freedom of expression, equal rights to education, job opportunities, and prosperity for the Uyghur people. For decades, my father called on the Chinese government to respect its own constitution, which states in Article 36 that ordinary Chinese citizens have the “freedom of religious beliefs.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, he was sentenced to life in prison and accused of ‘separatism’—a term the Chinese government commonly uses to label certain religious communities and Turkic ethnic groups in China, including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks.

China is officially an atheist state, and its Communist Party members are not permitted to join or practice religion.<sup>2</sup> The authorities’ concern is that religion can serve as an alternative to Communism and therefore undermine loyalty to the government. Since Xi Jinping first took

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Religious Repression in China,” 1998, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/china-98/religion.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

office in 2013, he has enacted a series of new policies and strategies towards cultural and religious practices to reshape them to align with Party ideology and foster loyalty to the Chinese government and himself.

In 2015, Chairman Xi called for the “Sinicization” of religion, urging all religious groups in China to conform to socialism by integrating their doctrines, customs, and morality with Han Chinese culture while emphasizing that only “normal” religious activities are permitted, while banning religious education among minors.<sup>3</sup> However, the definition of “normal” religious activities is never clearly specified. The Chinese government only embraces ethnic minority groups in the most superficial sense: some sorts of colorful dresses, singing, dancing, and exotic cuisines are acceptable but anything deeper that represents our culture and religious identity is rejected. A new regulation on online religious content bans unauthorized religious activities and unregistered religious groups from sharing religious content online.<sup>4</sup> In the Uyghur Region—referred to officially by the Chinese government as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and also known to local people as East Turkistan—local authorities patrol the cities daily. Uyghur women dressed modestly have reported that these authorities have even stopped them abruptly on the streets to cut their skirts short.<sup>5</sup> Religious signs and landmarks have been destroyed. Traditional Uyghur villages and street names have been renamed to fit political party lines; for example, to “Unity Town” or “Red Road”.<sup>6</sup>

Following Chairman Xi’s visit to the Uyghur Region in 2014, the Chinese government launched a sweeping campaign targeting Muslims in the region. This included the mass arbitrary detention of an estimated 1.8 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic ethnic groups in the Uyghur Region and a crackdown on religious and cultural practices under the guise of a so-called “poverty alleviation” and “de-extremification” program.<sup>7</sup>

In the years since, the Chinese government has continued to violate the right to freedom of religion and has developed a state-sponsored program consisting of “re-education” and forced labor as a form of widespread and systematic persecution of Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim-majority peoples on the basis of religion and ethnicity. While framed as efforts to “cleanse” these ethnic groups of their “extremist” thoughts, the program actually dilutes and

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<sup>3</sup> Bloomberg News, “Xi Stresses Sinicization and Regulation of Religious Activities,” *Bloomberg*, December 4, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-04/xi-stresses-sinicization-and-regulation-of-religious-activities>.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry An, “Chinese Christian Media Ministries Face Bitter Winter of Censorship,” *Christianity Today*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/12/chinese-christian-internet-mission-wechat-sara-religion-ban/>.

<sup>5</sup> Nicola Smith, “Chinese Authorities Accused of Cutting Uighur Dresses in Latest Crackdown on Muslim Minority,” *The Telegraph*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/17/chinese-authorities-accused-cutting-uighur-dresses-latest-crackdown/>.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China: Hundreds of Uyghur Village Names Change,” June 18, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/18/china-hundredapparatus.s-uyghur-village-names-change>.

<sup>7</sup> China Law Translate, “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-Extremification,” *China Law Translate*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/xinjiang-uyghur-autonoapparatus.mous-region-regulation-on-de-extremification>.

erases their culture and suppresses Muslim religious practices. This repression involves multiple forms of involuntary labor at workplaces across the Uyghur Region and also in other parts of China that are increasingly interwoven with global supply chains.

The state-imposed forced labor programs operate through three primary mechanisms: forced labor of internment camp detainees, forced labor transfers in and outside of the Region, and forced prison labor.<sup>8</sup> These abuses are well documented in a substantive body of credible evidence, gathered through witness testimony, Chinese state media, Chinese government records, and satellite imagery, and demonstrated in reports from United Nations bodies, academic experts, non-governmental organizations, and survivors themselves. Investigations show that the breadth of the government's policy creates a significant risk of the presence of forced labor at virtually any workplace, industrial or agricultural, in the Uyghur Region.<sup>9</sup>

This system of forced labor has been enabled by other egregious human rights violations, including mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, gender-based violence and harassment, rape, torture, political 're-education', and forced sterilization. The abuses are reinforced by a pervasive, technology-enabled system of surveillance apparatus.<sup>10</sup>

In situations of state-imposed forced labor, where widespread, systemic, egregious human rights violations are committed by state actors and while the entire region is placed in a vice-grip of repression, surveillance, and terror, it is a practical impossibility for a business to undertake credible due diligence on the ground. This is because it is not possible for a worker to speak candidly to an independent investigator without fear of retaliation or reprisal. By continuing to source from the Uyghur Region, international brands and retailers are complicit in these abuses. By contrast, withdrawing their business cuts off export earnings and the financial support that the state relies on to sustain this system.

The Chinese government has also been transporting Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim-majority peoples to other parts of China, for example, to Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, and Shandong, where they are placed to work in export-oriented factories under conditions that strongly indicate forced labor. According to recent research findings, at least 3.17 million people have been transferred away from their homes in the Uyghur Region through labor transfer programs.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Coalition to End Forced Labour in the Uyghur Region, *Call to Action*, July 2025, <https://enduyghurforcedlabour.org/call-to-action/>.

<sup>9</sup> Murphy, "China's Economy Runs on Uyghur Forced Labour," TBIJ, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, May 29, 2025, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2025-05-29/chinas-economy-runs-on-uyghur-forced-labour>.

<sup>10</sup> Johana Bhuiyan, "'There's Cameras Everywhere': Testimonies Detail Far-Reaching Surveillance of Uyghurs in China," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/30/uyghur-tribunal-testimony-surveillance-china>; and "Inside China's High-Tech Penal Colony with Darren Byler: Podcast and Transcript," *MS NOW*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/msnbc-podcast/inside-china-s-high-tech-penal-colony-darren-byler-podcast-n1281563>.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Zenz, "Forced Labor in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Assessing the Continuation of Coercive Labor Transfers in 2023 and Early 2024," *Jamestown Foundation*, February 14, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/forced-labor-transfers-in-2023-and-early-2024/>.

The conditions in the facilities are extremely poor. Uyghur workers are confined to overcrowded, unheated dormitories, where up to 20 people share communal beds that also serve as food preparation surfaces. They endure ten-hour workdays beginning as early as 5 a.m. Recent whistleblower testimony revealed that conditions can be worse than those in Chinese prisons.<sup>12</sup> Workers live under constant surveillance by state-appointed cadres who conduct nightly inspections, enforce headcounts, and monitor for any signs of religious activity. Praying and wearing headscarves are strictly forbidden. Workers are required to attend weekly flag-raising ceremonies and political indoctrination sessions.

Refusal to participate in labor programs is extremely rare. Those who resist face coercive “thought work” sessions and explicit threats of detention in re-education camps. As one account described, the system operates within a “pervasive atmosphere of fear.”<sup>13</sup>

I have dedicated the last five years of my life to uncovering the use of Uyghur forced labor in global supply chains and advocating for international corporations to exit the Uyghur Region, and facilities using forced labor transfers from the region, at every level of their supply chains, as that is the only way to guarantee that the products sold globally are free from Uyghur forced labor.

Uyghur forced labor touches at least 17 industries in global supply chains.<sup>14</sup> Today, as many as one in five cotton garments worldwide,<sup>15</sup> 10% of PVC plastics building materials,<sup>16</sup> nearly 10% of aluminum,<sup>17</sup> and 35% of the polysilicon used in solar panels are sourced from the Uyghur Region.<sup>18</sup> Given the lack of credibility and oversight for supply chain due diligence tools in this context, companies must immediately disengage from the region.

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[labor-in-the-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-assessing-the-continuation-of-coercive-labor-transfers-in-2023-and-early-2024/#:~:text=For%20the%2014th%20Five%2DYear,2%5D.](#)

<sup>12</sup> Adrian Zenz, “Op-Ed: Whistleblower Testimony Confirms Systematic Forced Labor in Xinjiang” *Sourcing Journal*, April 16, 2026, <https://wwd.com/sourcing-journal/industry-news/whistleblower-systematic-forced-labor-xinjiang-china-uyghur-1238864930/>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Coalition to End Forced Labour in the Uyghur Region, “End Uyghur Forced Labour in China Now,” accessed April 27, 2026, <https://enduyghurforcedlabour.org/>.

<sup>15</sup> Annie Kelly, “‘Virtually Entire’ Fashion Industry Complicit in Uighur Forced Labour, Say Rights Groups,” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/23/virtually-entire-fashion-industry-implicated-in-uighur-forced-labour-say-rights-groups-china>.

<sup>16</sup> Laura T. Murphy, Jim Vallette, and Nyrola Elimä, *Built on Repression: PVC Building Materials’ Reliance on Labor and Environmental Abuses in the Uyghur Region*, Sheffield Hallam University Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice and Material Research L3C, June 2022, <https://enduyghurforcedlabour.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/44/Murphy-BuiltOnRepressionVoR-1.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China: Carmakers Implicated in Uyghur Forced Labor,” February 1, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/01/china-carmakers-implicated-uyghur-forced-labor>.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Negrine, “Unshackling Workers in China’s Solar Supply Chain,” *East Asia Forum*, March 14, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/14/unshackling-workers-in-chinas-solar-supply-chain/>.

The United States has taken a crucial step by passing the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, banning imports from the region and from listed entities elsewhere in China implicated in labor transfers, barring proof of the absence of forced labor. Active, robust enforcement remains necessary—especially because corporations cannot be counted on to self-regulate. With that in mind, I highlight two specific recommendations:

1. For more than a year, civil society groups have waited for additional updates to the UFLPA Entity List. A series of research reports published in 2025 identified relevant entities that warrant addition along with many other implicated entities submitted earlier to the Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force. Continuous expansion of the Entity List is necessary to show importers which entities to avoid, and to help make abundantly clear that the US government is not deprioritizing the UFLPA or slowing down its implementation.
2. The US government should coordinate closely with countries that have adopted forced labor import bans, or are considering doing so, to ensure that those bans translate to pressing corporations to exit the Uyghur Region and facilities implicated in labor transfers from the region. Moreover, when Customs and Border Protection prevents goods from entering the US due to UFLPA non-compliance, it is important that these same goods do not have a safe harbor in other countries. By sharing information with other governments on which specific imports are blocked at the border due to concerns of forced labor, the US can help reduce the overall market for those goods, which will increase pressure on the Chinese government to abandon its program of state-sponsored forced labor.

Reforming global supply chains to respect human rights is a massive challenge. But if the US government vigorously implements the UFLPA, and coordinates with other governments that are enacting and strengthening forced labor import bans in doing so, then brands and retailers will increasingly shift their business model, and we will come closer to seeing a global economy that does not rely on the exploitation of the Uyghur people and one step closer to Uyghur people being able to freely and openly practice our religion, as well as reuniting the many forcibly separated Uyghur families, including mine.

To conclude, I will highlight three recommendations that are of critical importance to Uyghurs who have faced persecution as Muslims:

1. Integrate religious freedom into all U.S.-China bilateral and multilateral dialogues, ensuring it is never sidelined in pursuit of economic or security cooperation.
2. Protect vulnerable communities by strengthening asylum programs and humanitarian aid for Uyghurs at risk, while funding legal and psychosocial support for survivors of human rights violations.
3. Support civil society resilience by funding documentation of human rights violations, independent media, and diaspora organizations that provide lifelines to persecuted religious groups.