



Transnational Repression

Statement by Julie Millsap, Government Relations Manager, Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP)

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)
Hearing “Transnational Repression of Freedom or Belief”
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I would like to begin by thanking the Commission, and Chair Turkel in particular, for highlighting the issue of transnational repression in connection with the freedom of religion or belief. USCIRF’s role in the protection of freedom of religion and belief has become extremely relevant by recognizing that this is vital to address in order to effectively combat the most extreme violations of religious freedom and human rights.

I serve as the Government Relations Manager for the Uyghur Human Rights Project, and have worked publicly in Uyghur advocacy since 2020. Prior to that, I lived primarily in the People’s Republic of China from the year 2010 until my family’s necessitated departure in February of 2020. My spouse is a Chinese citizen and U.S. green card holder, and I am an American citizen. During my time in China, and particularly in my years as a public advocate, I have personally observed and interviewed many Uyghur and Chinese individuals who have been the victims of targeted harassment, surveillance, and physical threats by the Chinese Communist Party. In my capacity working in Government Relations, it has been my job to advocate for policy responses to hold the Chinese Communist Party accountable for genocide, but in recent years, this accountability also centers around helping to craft policy responses to transnational repression as a rapidly expanding issue.

The Chinese Communist Party has become increasingly emboldened to carry out acts of transnational repression. Particularly in light of expanding tactics carried out alongside other State actors like Russia, Iran, Rwanda, North Korea, and others, it is essential that the United States government act with urgency to combat this growing problem.

The Uyghur genocide is a human rights crisis that is unprecedented in our world today. This mass detention of an ethno-religious group is unparalleled not only in scale, but also in terms of the emboldened reach exercised by the Chinese Communist authorities to systematically

pursue Uyghurs living in other countries, as well as scholars, activists, and others who speak out against the crimes carried out by the Chinese Communist Party. This harassment can take many forms: through pressuring governments to forcibly return Uyghurs to China as one form of repression, and, on a larger scale, the targeted harassment, surveillance, and threats even on U.S. soil are not only appalling: they represent deliberate attempts to assault the very foundations of religious freedom and democracy, and are likewise an effort to undermine U.S. sovereignty; which represents a threat to our national security. Human rights and international religious freedom cannot be taken as isolated concerns. A failure to uphold human dignity and freedom will always be tied to instability and far-reaching societal implications.

In particular, the Chinese State's efforts to pursuing the Uyghur people across the globe while they face the existential threat of genocide, and the targeting of those who likewise speak the truth, represents the most glaring of examples of a future world order and the type of treatment that any religious minority might expect as Chinese influence grows. As religious identity has made Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples a prime target for the paranoid Chinese State, the cultivation of religious freedom internationally is likewise dependent on recognizing and responding to this threat.

Transnational Repression of Uyghurs and Those Who Speak on Uyghur Genocide

Kalbinur Ghenni¹, a Uyghur asylum seeker residing in Virginia, has been a frequent target for the Chinese authorities as she has been an especially vocal member of the Uyghur community, advocating for her sister, Renagul Ghenni, who is listed in USCIRF's FORB Victims Database. She has stated that Chinese authorities implied that they would grant her sister's early release in return for her silence, and that the Chinese authorities have used her family members as bait. While she has chosen not to place stock in such empty promises, her story is far from isolated.

Another notable instance is the case of Dr. Gulshan Abbas, whose detention has been labeled² arbitrary by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. Dr. Abbas disappeared in September of 2018, just days after her sister, a U.S. citizen, gave a public speech condemning the Chinese Communist Party's mass detention of Uyghurs. The Chinese authorities initially claimed that Dr. Abbas was a fictional representation, made up by her sister to smear the Chinese government. Later, upon independently obtaining information that she had been given a prison sentence, the Chinese foreign ministry confirmed the detention. To this date, Dr. Abbas has not been permitted to speak with her daughters or immediate family

¹ [Uyghur Woman, Family Harassed by Authorities in China's Xinjiang After Brief Meeting With US Official — Radio Free Asia \(rfa.org\)](#)

² [Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its ninety-fifth session, 14–18 November 2022 Opinion No. 88/2022 concerning Qurban Mamut, Ekpar Asat and Gulshan Abbas \(China\)](#)

members, who are all U.S. citizens.

The mother of USCIRF Chair Nury Turkel, Ayshem Turkel, has likewise been prohibited from exiting the PRC in retaliation for her son's long-term advocacy for the Uyghur people.

The PRC has long engaged in the use of exit bans as a tool of political repression for Uyghurs, and this trend is continuing and expanding at present³. While the two-track passport system has long provided engrained tools for the discriminatory issuance of travel documents, and has contributed to the restriction of religious practice by preventing such travel, this form of control remains in place and has likewise expanded to be used against foreign citizens and their family members.

Personal Experience

My own experience as a non-Uyghur advocate also attests to the increasing emboldenment of the Chinese State to engage in transnational repression with no fear of repercussion. Since going public with Uyghur advocacy, at various points, local authorities would ask my mother-in-law to entreat my spouse and I to return to China. Leading up to my testimony in 2021 for the independent Uyghur Tribunal held in London, I was the target of a gendered smear campaign⁴ which attempted to paint me as an adultress. Following the tribunal, my sister-in-law in China was visited by Chinese MSS agents who spoke to her for hours regarding my activities and instructed her to warn us about our engagement with "terrorist organizations". We received ominous messages through her WeChat account entreating us to think of our children (my son and niece) and to not "leave them as orphans" or "end up like the prisoners that you speak about". These Chinese agents also instructed my sister-in-law to inform us "We know everything". They made explicit references to monitoring our conversations.

In the fall of last year, the police returned. The day that my mother-in-law returned home from the hospital following a stay for cancer treatment, 3 Chinese agents came to her home. The following week, they returned again. Over the course of these visits, they indicated the level of awareness that they had regarding our personal life, including marital and financial stresses. They inquired about the state of our marriage, and encouraged my spouse to speak with them even if I did not agree. They encouraged our family members to encourage my spouse to "make friends" and stated that they could help us in any way needed. If we were to be friendly, they could facilitate a return to China, give us our businesses back, and ensure that our children went to the best schools, they said. They could also facilitate our family members leaving China if that is what we wanted. When we pressed back on this and reiterated that the U.S. government was responsible for facilitating who would come to the United States, and

³ [New Report: "Trapped - China's Expanding Use of Exit Bans" | Safeguard Defenders](#)

⁴ [How China tried to discredit London's Uyghur Tribunal and harass its witnesses - Coda Story](#)

that we hoped that they were not implying that they had power over this travel (perhaps in the form of exit bans) the point was temporarily dropped, but their check-ins have been ongoing, most recently referencing the “delicate” nature of the U.S.-China relationship and their desire to check up on international marriages and the situation of the individuals involved.

I am relatively privileged in that my in-laws have not to my knowledge been detained. For dissident individuals who themselves currently have or are considered to have held Chinese citizenship, the brutal hand of the Chinese State comes down far more harshly and swiftly.

Transnational Repression of Uyghurs: Overarching Trends

Our organization, The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) has reported extensively on the Chinese Communist Party’s acts of transnational repression against Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. Our 10 most recent reports⁵ and briefings published since 2017 included documentation of Uyghurs deported to China, most notably from Arab states.

Our reporting has also detailed the experiences of Uyghurs living in diaspora in democratic countries in 2021. In one survey, 74 percent reported digital harassment which included threats. Only 44 percent felt that their host governments take the intimidation seriously, and only 21 percent felt that the host governments would fix these issues. This data trend is collaborated by a recent report⁶ from the University of Sheffield on transnational repression in the Uyghur diaspora, which recorded that two thirds of Uyghurs surveyed in the United Kingdom had experienced direct threats against themselves or their families while living there. According to the same report, the number shifted to 4 in 5 Uyghurs reporting the same living in Turkey.

UHRP’s 2019 report, “[Repression Across Borders: The CCP’s Illegal Harassment and Coercion of Uyghur Americans](#),” focused on the CCP’s routine surveillance, threats and attempts to coerce on American soil. It is not ambitious to state that the Chinese Communist Party’s transnational repression affects each and every Uyghur American in diaspora, and particularly those who vocally condemn the genocide or merely, speak the truth about what is happening to their family members.

Community members often report calls from Chinese police, many times from their family members’ homes. Adalet Sabit, an Uyghur American resident of Alexandria, Virginia lost contact with her husband for close to two years, and her young daughter has not met her father since she was born. After being unable to confirm if her husband was in “reeducation”, sentenced, or had passed away, Adalet poured herself into public advocacy. As a result, she

⁵ [Transnational Repression of Uyghurs \(collected reports and policy recommendations \(uhrp.org\)\)](#)

⁶ [“We know you better than you know yourself”: China’s transnational repression of the Uyghur diaspora | East Asian Studies | The University of Sheffield](#)

had contact from him after her public advocacy campaign. In his first video call following this period, he admonished her to stop her activities. Following her refusal to do so, he missed an appointment with the U.S. Consulate in Guangzhou and she lost contact with him shortly after once again. At the time of this testimony, she is still seeking to reestablish contact.

Our most recent report on the subject, “On the Fringe of Society: Humanitarian Needs of the At-Risk Uyghur Diaspora”⁷ highlights the ways in which the Chinese State has actively interfered with Uyghur exiles’ ability to have their basic humanitarian needs met. It documents those needs in the United States, Turkey, and Central Asian countries, examining the ways that the diaspora has undertaken measures to support itself in response to transnational repression as well as identifying areas where additional support is needed.

Impact of Transnational Repression on the Uyghur Community

Immeasurable impacts of transnational repression include the mental health impact or consequences on one’s personal life. For Kalbinur Sidik, an ethnic Uzbek witness to the CCP’s camps, leaving China, seeking asylum in Europe, and speaking out against the Uyghur Genocide came at the cost of her marriage. Her husband was forced to denounce her publicly before divorcing via video call.

Certain aspects of the personal details of how such targeted oppression remain to be studied, but the mental health impact alone is easily discernible. As has been previously reported⁸, one non-scientific survey of members of the Uyghur diaspora revealed that roughly 1 in 4 individuals routinely experienced suicidal thoughts.

Policy Response

U.S. policy response has been inadequate to respond to threats to U.S. sovereignty on this level. As information has continued to come to light regarding the operation of Chinese illegal police stations across the globe, for many activists the news is a logical next step to decades⁹ of unchecked harassment. What used to be primarily digital has now materialized in the physical presence of what used to be confined within China’s national borders, or within the realm of telecommunications.

Legislation such as the Anti Social CCP Act¹⁰, and the Transnational Repression Policy Act¹¹, do contain provisions which are strong steps to addressing the issue. The United States must

⁷ [“On the Fringe of Society”: Humanitarian Needs of the At-Risk Uyghur Diaspora - Uyghur Human Rights Project \(uhrp.org\)](https://uhrp.org)

⁸ [Uyghurs outside China are traumatized. Now they’re starting to talk about it | MIT Technology Review](https://www.mit.edu/technology-review/2022/08/08/uyghurs-outside-china-are-traumatized-now-theyre-starting-to-talk-about-it/)

⁹ [CECC Hearing - Chinese Hacking - Louisa Greve Written Statement.pdf](https://www.cecc.gov/record/documents/download/attachment/11444)

¹⁰ [HEY23121 \(senate.gov\)](https://www.senate.gov/legislation/records/11444)

¹¹ [S.831 - 118th Congress \(2023-2024\): Transnational Repression Policy Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](https://www.congress.gov/bills/118/831)

take action to deter, and must encourage allied countries to do the same.

The present actions of the Chinese State can be summarized as crimes committed with impunity on U.S. persons. While law enforcement, such as the FBI, are increasingly cognisant and outward facing with addressing the issues, there have been notable missteps in the process of addressing the concerns of the Uyghur community in the United States. As other liberal democracies, including the United Kingdom, seek to implement their own policies to address transnational repression, it is important to note where improvements should be made.

First, in facilitating reporting mechanisms that will allow the community to feel safe enough, and incentivized, to share information, federal agencies should prioritize:

- 1) Language. Uyghur language operators in areas with significant Uyghur populations such as the greater Washington D.C. area, Los Angeles, Houston, and Boston.
- 2) Prioritized training for agents and tip line operators; including intake procedures that will allow for an individual to meet with an agent in person should they feel that stating the situation via phone presents a risk to themselves or to family members in China or elsewhere.
- 3) Effective community dialogue that projects the direction of where data collection is going. While transnational repression can be difficult to respond to, members of the community are not incentivized to report when they do not believe that the information collected will be used to pursue accountability. Communications that effectively project the strategy of the respective agency in gathering the information will go a long way in incentivizing the community to respond.

Recommendations for USCIRF

1. As has been previously suggested by UHRP, add adherence to the non-refoulement principle of non-refoulement as part of the overall metric for assessing religious freedom in adherence to international law.

2. In its own engagements with officials in other countries where applicable, particularly in Central Asia, Turkey, and other nations where Chinese influence presents a threat to the Uyghur diaspora, USCIRF should raise the issue of transnational repression citing specific cases. In particular, the governments of these countries should be encouraged to adopt non-refoulement policies for Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Turkic peoples who are likely to be targeted by the Chinese Communist Party for their religious identity.

3. USCIRF should seek to monitor instances of transnational repression based on individuals' religious beliefs or religious identity, and could include these statistics in their monitoring, as well as in any reports issued. Additionally, the Commission could produce reports specifically focused on the issue of transnational repression.
4. USCIRF should continue to highlight the issue of transnational repression, and the victims of it, in public messaging. Particularly as concerns the targeting of those on U.S. soil, which represents an urgent priority for Congress with far-reaching complications in the cultivation of religious freedom internationally.
5. Continue to seek regular updates and engagements with U.S. law enforcement to provide data to assist with implementation of efforts to protect vulnerable religious groups in the United States. USCIRF should seek to provide the FBI in particular with valuable context for these groups based on its data.
6. USCIRF should examine for its own policy recommendations the potential for creation of a Special Coordinator within the USG on the issue as well as for the U.S. government to press the United Nations for the creation of a Special Rapporteur on Transnational Repression.

Conclusion

To an extent, the experiences of the Uyghur diaspora with transnational repression by the Chinese State represent an expectation and normalization in countries outside of China. By failing to address these problems, and lacking effective accountability and deterrence measures, activists and ordinary people seeking information regarding loved ones they have been cut off from due to the ordinary practice of religious faith, or the guise of preventing extremism, have suffered consequences that are unduly treated as commonplace. While religious persecution in China and authoritarian countries is unsurprising, the undermining of sovereignty in democratic nations where victims of genocide and persecution flee is alarming. For Uyghurs, there is no place that provides a true safe haven while such targeting is ongoing.

About the Uyghur Human Rights Project:

The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) promotes the rights of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim peoples in East Turkistan, referred to by the Chinese government as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), through research-based advocacy. UHRP documents violations; highlights human rights defenders, survivors, and victims; and researches avenues for defense and positive promotion of Uyghurs' human rights, especially in the arenas of policymaking, grassroots action, and cultural rights promotion.

Contact: Julie Millsap, Government Relations Manager, jmillsap@uhrp.org, +1.830.822.7289

Annex on Transnational Repression

UHRP Submissions to Government

- [UHRP Written Submission CECC TNR June 15_2023-06-15.pdf](#)

UHRP Reports and Briefings:

- [REPORT: Humanitarian Needs of the Uyghur Diaspora | UHRP Report, Feb 1, 2023](#)
- [Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between Arab States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs - Uyghur Human Rights Project \(uhrp.org\)](#)
- ["Your Family Will Suffer": How China is Hacking, Surveilling, and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies - Uyghur Human Rights Project \(uhrp.org\)](#)
- ["Nets Cast from the Earth to the Sky": China's Hunt for Pakistan's Uyghurs - Uyghur Human Rights Project \(uhrp.org\)](#)

UHRP Statements:

- [WUC and UHRP Grieved by Death of Uyghur Refugee in Detention Center in Thailand, April 24, 2023](#)
- [UHRP Welcomes New US Legislation to Address Transnational Repression, March 20, 2023](#)
- [UN Committee Lambasts China for Trampling Economic, Social and Cultural Rights at Home and Abroad, March 7, 2023](#)
- [UHRP Commends Canada for Progress on Uyghur Resettlement, Urges Concerned Governments to Consider Similar Measures, Feb 1, 2023](#)
- [Ending "Business as Usual" to Combat the Genocide of the Uyghurs: UHRP Testimony Before USCIRF, Dec 14, 2022](#)
- [UHRP Praises CECC Findings on the Uyghur Genocide, Calls for Stronger US Policies, Nov 18, 2022](#)
- [Coalition Calls on Moroccan Authorities to Cancel Extradition Proceedings and Release Yidiresi Aishan from Detention, July 19, 2022](#)
- [52 Uyghur Groups Call for an End to Prolonged Detention of Uyghurs in Thailand on the Anniversary of Forced Return, July 8, 2022](#)
- [13 Years After July 5 Unrest in Ürümqi, UHRP Calls for Safe Haven for Uyghur Refugees, July 5, 2022](#)
- [Civil Society Calls for Urgent Measures to Protect Uyghurs at Risk of Refoulement,](#)

June 17, 2022