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# Notes From The Field

## Uyghur Diaspora Activism in the Face of Genocide

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*“Uyghur people have to be optimistic. That’s what has made us survive to this time. We have to keep hoping to keep surviving, especially for our children. If we don’t, how will they know who they are?” ~ Uyghur community member*

### Introduction

**D**uring the summer of 2021, I had the privilege of spending nearly every weekend with the Uyghur diaspora community of the Northern California Bay Area. Uyghurs are an ethnic group in northwestern China whose culture and identity are being systematically destroyed by Chinese government policies. They are one of China’s 56 officially recognized ethnic groups and reside primarily in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)—or East Turkestan, as they call their Indigenous homeland. Their total population is around twelve million. Uyghurs are Muslim and speak a Turkic language, which uses an Arabic-derived writing system. They are known for their music, dancing, poetry,

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calligraphy, and unique food, and their physical appearance is distinctly Central Asian.

Since 2017, Uyghurs have been imprisoned in China's "re-education camps" on an enormous scale (Werleman, 2019; Roberts, 2018; Rogin, 2018). It is estimated that as many as three million Uyghurs have been imprisoned in these camps, which are likened to concentration camps (Greitens et al., 2020; Zenz, 2019). Numerous reports have emerged from relatives of detainees in the camps, as well as from survivors who have been released. These include accounts of sexual violence, torture, organ harvesting, forced and coerced birth control and sterilization, imposed medications, forced eating of pork and drinking alcohol, and forced labor—all within (and beyond) the horrible conditions of the camps (Danilova, 2018; Denyer, 2018; Ferris-Rotman, 2019; Hoja, 2019; Lynch, 2019; Newlines Institute, 2021; Rahim, 2019; Zenz, 2020).

Uyghurs have been subjected to repressive state policies and institutionalized discrimination for decades, and many have disappeared, yet until recently, relatively little attention has been given to what has now become a gross human rights violation that many have argued amounts to genocide (Gerin, 2021; Newlines Institute, 2021; U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2021; Wong & Buckley, 2021). In this essay, I seek to raise awareness of the Uyghur genocide and hope that all those who are concerned with human rights will speak widely to educate one another and take action against these crimes against humanity, which continue to unfold as a major atrocity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Genocide**

The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to which China is a signatory, states that,

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;

- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (U.N. Genocide Convention art. 2)

As noted in the Convention, genocide refers to *any* of the acts listed above. Currently, the ongoing atrocities occurring in XUAR meet *all* of these criteria, as will be described in the following pages.

### ***Deaths and Crematoria***

In June 2018, it was reported that crematoria were rapidly being constructed throughout XUAR. Between March 2017 and February 2018, the XUAR government allotted millions of Yuan to build “burial management centers” that include crematoria in Uyghur-populated areas throughout the region. These crematoria were reported to be “staffed by dozens of security personnel” (Hoja, 2018, p. 1). The timing of the building of these crematoria coincides with the massive crackdown on and incarceration of Uyghurs.

### ***Physical and Psychological Torture***

Harrowing accounts from survivors of the camps include numerous incidents of physical and psychological torture. One former detainee described having to stand against a wall for hours and then being placed in solitary confinement without access to food (Shih & Kang, 2019). Many other accounts of being deprived of food as a form of punishment also exist (Rivers & Lee, 2019; Schmitz, 2018; Stavrou, 2019). Another former prisoner said that he was made to wear a heavy metal suit, which forced his arms and legs into an outstretched position for 12 hours at a time (Schmitz, 2018).

A number of reports of being bound and immobilized in another contraption called the “Tiger Chair” have also surfaced (Denyer, 2018). The use of this torture device in Chinese prisons has been known for years (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Yet another former detainee recalled that during an interrogation, he was “thrown into a hole in the ground, doused with cold water and severely beaten” (Campbell, 2019, p. 2).

Former inmates have described a torture room in which prisoners were hung on a wall and beaten with electric batons, forced to sit on a chair of sharp nails, and some had their fingernails torn out (Stavrou, 2019). A survivor recalled that she “saw people return from that room covered in blood” (Stavrou, 2019, p. 7). According to survivors, people were punished in the camps for anything (or nothing) ranging from not learning Mandarin well or fast enough, to not singing patriotic songs, to not following the rules (Rahim, 2019; Rivers & Lee, 2019; Stavrou, 2019).

Mihrigul Tursun, a Uyghur woman who was detained three separate times, testified before Congress in November 2018 detailing her torturous experiences. These included being interrogated for days without sleep, using the toilet under the constant gaze of security cameras, and having to take turns sleeping in an overcrowded cell with 60 other women (Danilova, 2018). Tursun further described being electrocuted with a helmet-like apparatus and said that she suffered from seizures and bouts of losing consciousness after being in the camp for three months (Danilova, 2018; Meixler, 2018). One of the things she clearly remembered from her electrocution sessions was being explicitly told that being Uyghur is a crime (Danilova, 2018).

### ***Forced Birth Control***

Women are thought to make up only a third of the prisoners in the camps, but the actions against them—which focus on preventing their ability to reproduce—have an enormous impact on the Uyghur population as a whole. Sexual assault, forced abortions, imposed birth control, and sterilization have all been reported by former detainees (Ferris-Rotman, 2019; Hoja, 2019; Maizland, 2020; Stavrou, 2019).

Accounts of women being forced to take pills and receive injections of unknown substances that disrupted or stopped their menstrual cycles began to emerge in the fall of 2018 (Danilova, 2018; Lynch, 2019). A former detainee stated, “There were women who were inside for one year and during that entire time they never had their monthly period” (Hoja, 2019, p. 1). Women have also reported having IUDs forcibly implanted while in the camps, despite clearly stating that they didn’t want one (Ferris-Rotman, 2019; Maizland, 2020; Stavrou, 2019). A woman who was detained in 2017 recalled that the doctor who was forcibly inserting her IUD told her that “it’s a must for all women going to the camp” (Ferris-Rotman, 2019, p. 5).

### ***Forced Family Separation***

Toward the end of 2017, reports began to emerge of children being placed in state care after having their parents detained in the camps, even if they had grandparents who were available to care for them (Feng, 2018; Zenz, 2019). State-run facilities that house these children include orphanages, children’s shelters, and boarding schools. By all accounts, these shelters and schools are large, overcrowded, highly secured compounds with armed police officers, barred windows, and barbed wire fences (Hoshur, 2018; Wang & Kang, 2018; Zenz, 2019). The facilities include boarding preschools, which admit children as young as a few months old (Zenz, 2019).

Throughout 2017 and 2018, the XUAR government increased its ability to house children of all ages in boarding facilities. In June 2018, the XUAR government issued a directive which stated that “all urban and rural regions in Xinjiang were to establish boarding facilities” for children (Zenz, 2019, p. 17). In Kashgar, boarding became mandatory for students in fourth grade and higher.

The Chinese government has chillingly argued that

the children of detained parents derive significant benefits from this separation, that both parents and children need to “study”, (and) that the “left-behind children” of parents who

“work” are happily growing up under the loving care of the Party and the government. (Zenz, 2019, p. 2)

### ***Declaring Genocide***

As reports continue to emerge from journalists, researchers, survivors of the camps, and Uyghur diaspora members, countries are gradually beginning to declare genocide in XUAR. The United States was the first to do so in January 2021 (Wong & Buckley, 2021). Since then, Canada, the U.K., the Netherlands, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Belgium, and France, as well as independent reports (Newlines Institute, 2021; U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2021; Uyghur Tribunal, 2021), have all declared China’s actions against Uyghurs as genocide (Gerin, 2021).

### **Destruction of Uyghur Culture and Identity**

Concurrently with the ongoing genocide, Uyghurs are experiencing a dismantling of their culture and identity as another piece of China’s totalitarian effort to subjugate them and exercise physical and social control. On April 1, 2017, China imposed a ban on growing “abnormal” beards and wearing veils and burqas throughout XUAR, which clearly targeted Uyghurs (Hunt et al., 2017; Shephard & Blanchard, 2017). Common Uyghur and Muslim names, including “Mohammed” and “Fatima,” have also been banned by the Chinese government, and parents have been forced to change their children’s names (Haas, 2017; Hernandez, 2017; Lin, 2017; Sulaiman, 2015).

### ***Mandarin-Only Instruction***

The Chinese government has been heavily promoting Mandarin-only instruction throughout XUAR, and people have been penalized for speaking Uyghur (Zenz, 2019; Wang & Kang, 2018). The Education Department in XUAR claimed that by the end of 2018, the nearly three million students

attending school in the region “were expected to have a fully Chinese-medium language education” (Zenz, 2019, p. 21).

### ***Destruction of Mosques and Cemeteries***

Mosques, shrines, and cemeteries have been desecrated and destroyed throughout XUAR since 2016 (Hiatt, 2019; Kuo, 2019; Sintash, 2019). Hundreds of traditional Uyghur cemeteries were bulldozed and demolished within just a few years (Rivers, 2020; Sintash, 2019). Many of these cemeteries had existed for centuries or longer and were gathering places for multiple generations of Uyghurs to visit their relatives and connect with their ancestors (Rivers, 2020). At least 80% of the mosques throughout XUAR have also been destroyed (UHRP, 2019). Most of those which remain, primarily for tourism, have had their domes, minarets, and religious symbols and inscriptions removed and, in some cases, replaced with party banners (Hiatt, 2019; Kashgarian, 2019; Sintash, 2019).

### ***Forced birth control and sterilization (outside of camps)***

Historically, Uyghur population growth rates have been much higher than those of the Han Chinese population. In 2015; however, the population growth rate in XUAR began to decline. Between 2015 and 2018, growth rates in XUAR’s two largest Uyghur prefectures dropped by 84 percent and continued to decline further in 2019 (Zenz, 2020). Zenz (2020) found that 80 percent of all new IUD insertions in 2018 throughout China happened in XUAR, even though the region only makes up 1.8 percent of the nation’s population as a whole. In addition, a mass sterilization (“free birth control surgery”) campaign was launched in XUAR in 2019 to “effectively control excessive population growth” (Zenz, 2020, p. 16). By 2019, over 80 percent of the women in Xinjiang’s rural southern prefectures were “to be subjected to birth control measures with long-term effectiveness” (Zenz, 2020, p. 12).

## **Uyghur Diaspora**

Uyghur diaspora communities exist around the world, and it is estimated that 1-1.6 million Uyghurs reside outside of China (Amnesty, 2020). Since 2017, Uyghurs of the diaspora have been widely targeted and harassed by the Chinese government under the threat of harming their family members back in XUAR (Amnesty, 2020; De Bourmont, 2018; Haas, 2019). A Uyghur in Germany was contacted by a Chinese official who ominously said, “You’re living overseas, but you need to think of your family while you’re running around doing your activism work... You need to think of their safety” (Haas, 2019, p. 2). Uyghurs living in diaspora communities throughout Europe have experienced “threats against family members back in Xinjiang, and some were asked to spy for China” (Haas, 2019, p. 2). I have heard similar accounts from Uyghurs living in the United States.

From 2017 to the present, family ties between Uyghurs of the diaspora and those in East Turkestan have been severed, with relatives in their homeland telling family members abroad to stop contacting them, or simply cutting off contact. I first learned of this in 2018 when distraught Uyghur college students studying in the United States were suddenly told by their parents to stop calling and fend for themselves. A Uyghur in Scandinavia reported that his relatives were too afraid to speak to him, either hanging up the phone when they heard his voice or not answering at all (De Bourmont, 2018). James Millward, a respected scholar of XUAR for decades, stated that “many families have had to delete contacts off their phones,” presumably for their own and their relatives’ safety (De Bourmont, 2018, p. 4).

## **Resistance to Chinese State Violence**

Uyghurs in diaspora communities around the world have been speaking out in resistance to Chinese hegemony at great risk to themselves and their family members. A number of high-profile Uyghurs speak publicly to a range of audiences about the ongoing atrocities in their homeland, despite having their relatives sent to prison for long-term sentences

(Amnesty International, 2020; Ramzy, 2021). These include Rushan Abbas, who founded the organization Campaign For Uyghurs in 2017, shortly after which her sister, Gulshan Abbas, was imprisoned; Jewher Ilham, the daughter of the well-known Uyghur scholar, Ilham Tohti, who speaks widely about her father's unlawful imprisonment and the ongoing genocide; and Reyhan Asat, a human rights attorney currently serving as a World Fellow at Yale University, who often shows a photograph of her missing brother, Ekpar Asat, in her public talks and appearances.

Some Uyghurs are also involved in visible activism within their own local communities. Every year, the Uyghur diaspora community of the Bay Area organizes a Uyghur Freedom March on July 5 to commemorate the Urumqi massacre<sup>1</sup> of July 5, 2009 in which Uyghurs were brutalized and arrested en masse following what began as a peaceful protest. Many people attended the march this past summer (2021), which began and ended in front of the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco. Some Uyghurs appeared publicly for the first time during this event. They conveyed that they felt they had to do something, even though they were afraid to show their faces. During the march, a Uyghur youth expressed that she dreams of a day when her teachers and non-Uyghur friends will know who Uyghurs are and what they have endured in recent history.

Uyghurs of the Bay Area have also been engaging in resistance quietly within their own community. They are actively making efforts to preserve their culture and identity in a number of ways as a means of deliberate resistance to Chinese cultural erasure. They have created a school for their children to learn the Uyghur language and cultural traditions. This program meets weekly and has grown from just one class with a few participants to multiple classes for children ranging from 2-18 years old. Older students also learn literature, which is significant because, according to a Uyghur community member, Uyghur literature and poetry have disappeared from bookstores in China, so it is up to diaspora members to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bitterwinter.org/urumqi-uyghurs-massacre-of-july-2009/>

carry on this cultural knowledge. In addition, families get together on weekends, and adults socialize while the kids play soccer. A young Uyghur woman told me that she only recently started attending these gatherings because previously her family felt it was too dangerous to participate in anything that had Uyghurs together in one place. Although she now participates regularly to be connected to her community, her parents do not. They fear being targeted by an extension of the Chinese government, as well as reprisals against their relatives back home in East Turkestan.

Uyghurs of the diaspora have also been organizing events online to allow for greater participation nationwide. They hold information sessions on practical issues, such as how to file taxes, as well as cultural programs and events, including online dance classes and learning about Islamic traditions, such as Ramadan.

A number of Uyghurs have spoken to me on condition of anonymity about being cut off from their family members in East Turkestan since 2017. I have heard many painful statements along the lines of “I can’t sleep because I imagine what my relatives are going through,” and “my hope is just that they survive.” One Uyghur community member stated, “On the outside, I look alive for the sake of my children, but on the inside, I am dead.” This is not only heartbreaking, but under the current circumstances, children are prevented from knowing their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, thereby limiting their sense of family identity and obstructing intergenerational cultural transmission. This motivates Uyghurs of the diaspora all the more to maintain their language and traditions, such as through dancing, wearing traditional Uyghur clothing, preparing and eating Uyghur food, and observing Islamic practices, including celebrating Qurban Heyt (Eid al-Adha). Because of the cultural eradication happening in XUAR, Uyghurs consider these acts to be a matter of survival for their people and future generations.

As an ally of the Uyghur community for multiple years initially connected through a former student, in July 2021 I was honored to attend an event to view photographs of Kashgar from the early 1980s. The city of Kashgar, which is considered a historical and cultural center for Uyghurs, has been modernized to serve as an international commercial hub as part of

China's Belt and Road Initiative,<sup>2</sup> a massive economic development project. The Old City of Kashgar was demolished in the early 2000s, despite containing "most of the best-preserved examples of traditional Central Asian urban residential architecture in the world" (Roberts, 2020, p. 137). The photographs showed largely undeveloped land with groups of veiled women, bearded men wearing traditional hats, and smiling children going about their daily lives. There were scenes of crowded streets, musicians, markets, children playing in alleys, and traditional Uyghur food. Each time a photo appeared with a group of Uyghurs gathered together, a collective sigh of regret spread throughout the room, and the sorrow was palpable. These sorts of gatherings simply do not take place anymore. A Uyghur community member told me that "anytime three (or more) Uyghurs are together, police come and ask what they are doing. They cannot even speak to each other."

The old photographs of Kashgar also included many beautiful, intricate, colorful, tiled mosques and Uyghur cemeteries. The response was similar. As people viewed the photographs, they looked at each other and shook their heads mournfully. Some people blotted their eyes, as most of these places no longer exist.

## **Conclusion**

In the face of the ongoing genocide and China's threats to Uyghurs of the diaspora, telling one's story is itself a courageous act of resistance. I have spoken with numerous Uyghurs of the diaspora who come from different places in East Turkestan, and their stories hauntingly overlap. Given the horrors and trauma that Uyghurs are contending with, it is incredibly moving and inspiring to see them engage in acts of resistance against Chinese state violence. Many of them see their actions as a matter of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

cultural survival in the face of its systematic eradication by the Chinese state.

China has used the narrative of terrorism to justify the campaign of internment and repression in XUAR. Without exception, the dozens of Uyghurs I have met have been kind, generous, and engaged in nonviolent resistance. As one Uyghur community member said, “I wish more people would see that we are not how China portrays us.” While Uyghur youth long for understanding and recognition, and their parents quietly face the daily trauma of uncertainty hoping their relatives are still alive, they continue to persevere.

Despite the existing evidence and numerous, consistent testimonies, only a small number of countries have declared the atrocities faced by Uyghurs as a genocide. Much of the world, including Muslim-majority countries, continues to ignore this crisis and even supports China’s actions in the name of “fighting terrorism.” I wonder what more needs to happen for the world to acknowledge these egregious crimes against humanity. In October 2018, a scholar and historian of East Asia published a piece entitled “China’s Final Solution in Xinjiang” (Yu, 2018). This reference echoes the horrors of the Holocaust. Given the similarities in repression occurring in the Uyghur homeland, it is my sincere hope that despite China’s economic power, the international community will consider the ethical implications of inaction and will emphasize human rights instead of profit as a guide for making decisions and taking action. Calls of “never again” must be heeded now.

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