



# Islam Dispossessed

China's Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures

**UHRP**

UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

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## About the Uyghur Human Rights Project

The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) promotes the rights of the Uyghur people through research-based advocacy. We publish reports and analysis in English and Chinese to defend Uyghurs' civil, political, social, cultural, and economic rights according to international human rights standards.

## About Justice for All

Justice For All is a grassroots American Muslims led human rights organization. Its Save Uyghur campaign has been advocating for Uyghurs' rights. Justice For All has a DPI Status at the United Nations. It is based in Chicago, with staff in Washington DC, New York, Boston, Houston, Atlanta and Toronto ([www.JusticeForAll.org](http://www.JusticeForAll.org)).

## Author

The report was researched and written by Peter Irwin, Senior Program Manager for Advocacy and Communications at the UHRP.

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# Table of Contents

<b>I.</b>	<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>Sources and Methodology .....</b>	<b>8</b>
	Notes on terminology .....	10
	Who should read this report?.....	12
<b>III.</b>	<b>Dataset on Detention of Religious Figures .....</b>	<b>12</b>
	Key findings.....	12
	Once favored, now threatened .....	23
	Charges for past behavior/actions .....	25
	Guilt by association.....	26
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Contemporary Religious Practices .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>V.</b>	<b>Uyghur Religious History.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Imams Speak of Openness, Renewed Restrictions .....</b>	<b>40</b>
	Religious revival tempered.....	41
	Mandatory courses for imams.....	47
	Pre-written sermons.....	51
	Resistance.....	52
	Xi Jinping and the second-generation nationalities policies .....	57
	A bleak future for Islam.....	66
<b>VII.</b>	<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>69</b>
	To the People's Republic of China .....	69
	To the United Nations.....	70
	To national governments.....	70
	To governments with Muslim-majority populations .....	71
	To civil society .....	71

## Glossary of Terms

*Uyghur*: Uyghurs are an ethnically and culturally Turkic people living primarily in the area of Central Asia commonly known as East Turkistan (not to be confused with the Hui, an ethnic group composed of Chinese-speaking Muslims).

*East Turkistan*: The name used by Uyghurs to denote the vast region, now under control of the People's Republic of China, that is the historical home of the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples.

*Xinjiang*: The colonial name, meaning *new frontier* or *new border*, used by the Chinese government to denote the region that East Turkistan today covers. "Xinjiang" began appearing in Qing documents in 1884.

*Imam*: The worship leader of a mosque, who may also perform other duties in the local community such as officiating formal weddings and funerals.

*Büwi*: The Uyghur name used to refer to female religious leaders who lead women's religious gatherings, and often provide a basic religious education for local children.

*Khatib*: An imam who typically leads Friday or Eid prayer.

*Talip*: A Muslim religious student who is studying Islam.

*Molla*: In relation to Uyghurs, a molla is a Muslim intellectual, someone who has specialized knowledge about Islam, and is thereby bestowed a certain level of authority in the community.

*Damolla*: In relation to Uyghurs, a damolla is an advanced Islamic scholar with the authority to train other scholars who were "often much sought after by students from all over Xinjiang."<sup>1</sup>

*Muezzin*: A individual person appointed at a mosque to lead and recite the call to prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Elke Spiessens, "Diasporic Lives of Uyghur Mollas," in *Ethnographies of Islam in China*, eds. Harris, Ha and Jaschok (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), p. 281.

# I. Executive Summary

Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan (also known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China) have long endured repressive Chinese government policies targeting their cultural identity. Religious leaders in particular have been frequent subjects of state-directed abuse.

This report presents new evidence detailing the extent to which Uyghur religious figures have been targeted over time. Using primary and secondary sources, we have compiled a dataset consisting of 1,046 cases of Turkic imams and other religious figures from East Turkistan detained for their association with religious teaching and community leadership since 2014.<sup>2</sup> The total cases in the dataset should not, however, be construed as an estimate of the *total* number imams detained or imprisoned. The total cases we have reviewed likely represent only the very tip of the iceberg, given severe restrictions on access to information.

Of the cases in our dataset, 428 (41%) are individuals who have been sent to formal prisons (including 304 sentenced to prison terms), 202 (19%)<sup>3</sup> have been detained in concentration camps<sup>4</sup> (“re-education centers”), and 18 have died while in detention or in prison, or shortly thereafter. We reviewed many more cases of alleged detention that lacked important case details.

The dataset shows that the government has targeted mostly male Uyghur religious figures born between 1960 and 1980. However, a sizable minority of Kazakh Islamic clergy of roughly the same demographic group have also been detained, as well as several

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<sup>2</sup> An additional 30 cases from 1999-2013 have also been included.

<sup>3</sup> Of these cases, 102 indicate that their current status (at the time of submission) is “prison or camp.” Given that none of these cases include sentencing data, we reason that they are more likely in camps than prison, and have treated these cases as such.

<sup>4</sup> UHRP has chosen to use the term “concentration camp” to describe the camps built to hold significant numbers of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples, given that the term refers to the mass detention of civilians without trial, usually on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. Andrea Pitzer, a leading expert on concentration camps, considers the detention centers in East Turkistan as such. See CBC, “On anniversary of Auschwitz liberation, writer calls attention to modern-day concentration camps,” January 27, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/on-anniversary-of-auschwitz-liberation-writer-calls-attention-to-modern-day-concentration-camps-1.5442253>.

Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tatar figures, indicating the breadth of persecution. Up to 57 cases in our dataset (5%) concern individuals over the age of 60.

The high rate of prison sentences (versus shorter-term camp detentions) in the dataset offers clues about the target and motivation of Chinese government policy in relation to religious figures. That 41% of the individuals in our dataset have been given prison sentences illustrates the intention of the Chinese government not just to criminalize religious expression or practice, but also to consider imams criminals by virtue of their profession.

Many of the cases indicate that government definitions of “illegal” or “extremist” have been ambiguous for years, likely purposely so. As a result, Turkic clergy in East Turkistan have been sentenced to prison terms for quotidian religious practices and expression protected under both Chinese law and internationally recognized human rights treaties.

Grounds for imprisonment in the cases we reviewed include “illegal” religious teaching (often to children), prayer outside a state-approved mosque, the possession of “illegal” religious materials, communication or travel abroad, separatism or extremism,<sup>5</sup> and officiating or preaching at weddings and funerals, as well as other charges that simply target religious affiliation. The dataset includes cases of prison sentences of 15 years or more for “teaching others to pray,” “studying for six months in Egypt,” and “refusing to hand in [a] Quran book to be burned,” as well as a life sentence for “spreading the faith and for organizing people.”

Some of those detained were once formally sanctioned by the government to serve as imams, suggesting that the imams’ “criminality” is the result of a policy reversal. Several cases also indicate that the government applied retroactive sentences for alleged violations that took place years prior.

Our dataset also indicates a major spike in the sentencing of religious figures in 2017, tracking closely with available government

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<sup>5</sup> Both “separatism” and “extremism” are defined very broadly by the Chinese government and have been used to justify the detention of Uyghurs on dubious grounds.

data.<sup>6</sup> Of the 304 cases we reviewed that included data on length of sentence, 96% included sentences of at least five years, and 25% included sentences of 20 years or more, including 14 life sentences, often on unclear charges.

In addition to compiling and collating detention data, we also interviewed Uyghur imams outside of East Turkistan, as well as the son of an imam currently in detention. Our interviewees revealed details of harassment and persecution spanning several decades for their role serving their local congregations. The imams described facing varying degrees of persecution beginning in the 1980s until they fled the region in the 2015 and 2016 as a result of surveillance and the threat of detention. Their stories fill in many of the gaps in our understanding of the on-the-ground effects of Chinese government policies over time, as well as of forms of everyday resistance on the local level.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Chinese authorities in East Turkistan passed a proliferation of laws and regulations governing religion from the national to the local level, buttressing the new regulations with obligatory loyalty pledges, state-managed trainings, examinations, and enhanced oversight of imams in order to keep religious teaching under strict control. Uyghur-led protests in the 1990s, which resulted from restrictions on cultural practice, prompted the regional government to harden its policies even further, which led to a perpetuating cycle of domination and control well into the 2000s.

Imams we interviewed report having been persistently watched, followed, scrutinized, and directed in their work in the mosque, which escalated to a point where they felt that they no longer played a positive role in their work. All of our interviewees decided to flee East Turkistan because of relentless government policies and fears of possible detention. In 2017, the explosive growth in camps designed to arbitrarily detain and forcibly indoctrinate Uyghurs en masse confirmed those fears.

**This report makes clear that imams and other religious figures, similar to members of the intellectual class in Uyghur society, stand at the very center of what one might describe as concentric circles of repression.**

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Buckley, "China's Prisons Swell After Deluge of Arrests Engulfs Muslims," *New York Times*, August 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html>.

This report makes clear that imams and other religious figures, similar to members of the intellectual class in Uyghur society, stand at the very center of what one might describe as concentric circles of repression. The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has targeted religious leaders for decades. So, too, did pre-PRC leaders, given their discomfort with groups and identities that might compete with the influence of the central authorities. Whereas all Turkic peoples in East Turkistan have faced strict government controls in recent years, and whereas increasingly capricious government authorities are now willing to detain just about anyone, religious figures were targeted early and severely.

Chinese government efforts to detain and sentence Uyghur clergy have also taken place within the context of a state-led campaign to substantially modify or completely destroy religious and cultural sites like mosques, shrines, and cemeteries. Researchers have found that since around 2017, up to 16,000 mosques in East Turkistan (roughly 65% of all mosques) have been destroyed or damaged as a result of government policies with an estimated 8,500 demolished outright.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, around 30% of all important Islamic sacred sites such as shrines, cemeteries, and pilgrimage routes have been demolished and another 28% damaged or altered, mostly since 2017.

As a result, even if imams have not been detained or forced out of their mosques, the physical destruction of their places of worship means that they have no place to preach or pray, given that religious practice at home has been prohibited. In the 1990s and 2000s, the Chinese government began confining religious practices only to mosques according to the law, only to later begin destroying the very mosques that served as the only “legal” spaces for religious practice.

In addition to placing harsh restrictions on imams and religious figures, and to destroying the physical spaces where they operate,

**The Chinese government has targeted influential and knowledgeable Uyghur and other Turkic religious figures in a transparent attempt to halt the intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge in East Turkistan.**

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Strategic Policy Institute, “Cultural erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang,” September 24, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>. For an earlier report on the destruction of religious heritage, see Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Demolishing Faith: The Destruction and Desecration of Uyghur Mosques and Shrines,” October 2019, <https://uhrp.org/press-release/demolishing-faith-destruction-and-desecration-uyghur-mosques-and-shrines.html>.



the Chinese government has pursued an extreme campaign to prohibit nearly every Islamic practice foundational to the Uyghur people. In policy and practice, authorities have prohibited the teaching of religion at all levels of education; banned the use of traditional Islamic names like Muhammad and Medina for Uyghur children;<sup>8</sup> banned long beards for Uyghur men and headscarves for Uyghur women;<sup>9</sup> instituted an “anti-halal” campaign to prevent the labeling of food and other products as halal;<sup>10</sup> criminalized Hajj pilgrimage without government approval;<sup>11</sup> and adopted legislation broadly defining quotidian religious practices as “extremist,” which a group of UN independent experts urged to be repealed in its entirety.<sup>12</sup>

Representatives of the state also began purposefully humiliating imams and religious figures in recent years, including by forcing them to dance in public or participate in degrading activities like singing songs praising the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>13</sup> One imam interviewed by UHRP for this report corroborated this in his testimony, and shared that he and several hundred other imams were forced to wear athletic clothing and dance in a public square in 2014.

This evidence has been compiled by journalists, researchers, and experts, illustrating how Chinese government policy has been designed to eliminate core aspects of Islamic practice and expression. Chinese authorities have gone to great lengths,

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<sup>8</sup> Javier Hernández, “China Bans ‘Muhammad’ and ‘Jihad’ as Baby Names in Heavily Muslim Region,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/world/asia/china-xinjiang-ban-muslim-names-muhammad-jihad.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Article 9(8), 新疆维吾尔自治区去极端化条例 [XUAR Regulations on De-Extremification], passed March 29, 2017, effective April 1, 2017, [www.xjpcsc.gov.cn/article/225/lfgz.html](http://www.xjpcsc.gov.cn/article/225/lfgz.html).

<sup>10</sup> Lily Kuo, “Chinese authorities launch ‘anti-halal’ crackdown in Xinjiang,” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/10/chinese-authorities-launch-anti-halal-crackdown-in-xinjiang>.

<sup>11</sup> 中华人民共和国国务院令 [Religious Affairs Regulations], Article 70, amended June 14, 2017, effective February 1, 2018, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content\\_5223282.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm).

<sup>12</sup> UN Special Procedures Joint Other Letter to China, OL CHN 21/2018, November 12, 2018, [spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24182](http://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24182).

<sup>13</sup> Express Tribune, “Suppressing religious freedoms: Chinese imams forced to dance in Xinjiang region,” April 18, 2015, [www.tribune.com.pk/story/871879/suppressing-religious-freedoms-chinese-imams-forced-to-dance-in-xinjiang-region/](http://www.tribune.com.pk/story/871879/suppressing-religious-freedoms-chinese-imams-forced-to-dance-in-xinjiang-region/). See also Sounding Islam in China, “Imams dancing to ‘Little Apple’ in Uch Turpan, Xinjiang,” March 25, 2015, [soundislamchina.org/?p=1053](http://soundislamchina.org/?p=1053).

however, to ensure that some Islamic practice remains in East Turkistan as a means of demonstrating the government's purported commitment to respecting "normal religious activities."<sup>14</sup> The government boasts, for example, that it has strengthened the "cultivation and training of clerical personnel"<sup>15</sup> by operating training institutes, but these schools have served, for many years, to maintain strict control over the imams and their teaching.<sup>16</sup> Any expression of religious identity by Uyghurs in Chinese state media appears highly choreographed, repeating Party slogans and policies, and belies evidence presented in this report and elsewhere. What remains of religious practice among Uyghurs persists as merely a shell of its former self—thoroughly dispossessed of the richness of Islam freely practiced elsewhere.

The Chinese government has targeted influential and knowledgeable Uyghur and other Turkic religious figures in a transparent attempt to halt the intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge in East Turkistan. By reducing legal religious practice to only individuals over the age of 18 within the confines of state-sanctioned mosques led by state-sanctioned imams while firmly prohibiting teaching religion to children at home, while then later demolishing even some of those state-sanctioned religious structures, the Chinese government is extinguishing free religious practice in a single generation. Taken together, these policies will make it difficult—if not impossible—for Uyghurs to maintain any semblance of religious expression in the years to come.

The current campaign targeting Uyghur and Turkic people bears a striking resemblance to the horrors of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) as it was experienced in East Turkistan.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Article 36 of the PRC Constitution states "The state protects normal religious activities," which is repeated in the Regulations on Religious Affairs and other official documents. The use of the qualifier "normal" has allowed the government to narrowly define what constitutes legal religious activity, and criminalize a long list of behavior protected under international law.

<sup>15</sup> Xinhua, "Fact Check: Lies on Xinjiang-related issues versus the truth," February 5, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/05/c\\_139723816.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/05/c_139723816.htm).

<sup>16</sup> See Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Sacred Right Defiled: China's iron fisted repression of Uyghur religious freedom," April 30, 2013, pp. 29–35, <https://docs.uhrp.org/Sacred-Right-Defiled-Chinas-Iron-Fisted-Repression-of-Uyghur-Religious-Freedom.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> James Millward, writing in relation to the situation in East Turkistan during the Cultural Revolution, describes reports of "Qur'ans burnt; mosques, mazars, madrasas and Muslim cemeteries shut down and desecrated; non-Han intellectual and religious elders humiliated in

While policies and forms of repression in the two eras do indeed share some similarities, the scale and scope of what is happening today makes this current campaign of repression distinct, particularly thanks to the ability of the state to utilize sophisticated technologies to “predict” criminality and infiltrate even the most intimate unit of the family home. The Turkic population of East Turkistan is facing its darkest era in decades, and Uyghur religious figures have borne the brunt of repression.

\* \* \*

The Chinese government's broad campaign to eliminate central aspects of the Uyghur identity, including religious belief and practice, likely amounts to genocide under international law.<sup>18</sup> Rather than respond to calls to close the concentration camps and respect Uyghur rights over the last three years, Chinese leaders have doubled down and claimed that their approach has been “completely correct.”<sup>19</sup> Despite mounting criticism, Chinese authorities have indicated that they will forge ahead in this campaign, evidenced by the continued construction of camps,<sup>20</sup> and the increasing use of widespread forced labor.<sup>21</sup>

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parades and struggle meetings; native dress prohibited; long hair on young women cut off in the street,” which directly resemble forms of repression taking place in East Turkistan today. See James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 275.

<sup>18</sup> At the time of publishing, several governments have called the treatment of Uyghurs a genocide, including the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands. Additional studies have come to the same conclusion. See Newlines Institute, “The Uyghur Genocide: An Examination of China's Breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention,” March 8, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/uyghurs/the-uyghur-genocide-an-examination-of-chinas-breaches-of-the-1948-genocide-convention/>; and BBC, “Uighurs: ‘Credible case’ China carrying out genocide,” February 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-55973215>.

<sup>19</sup> Isaac Yee and Griffiths, James, “China's President Xi says Xinjiang policies ‘completely correct’ amid growing international criticism,” CNN, September 27, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/27/asia/china-xi-jinping-xinjiang-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Megha Rajagopalan, Alison Killing, and Christo Buschek, “China Secretly Built A Vast New Infrastructure To Imprison Muslims,” *Buzzfeed News*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/china-new-internment-camps-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims>.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Lehr and Efthimia Maria Bechrakis, “Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang: Forced Labor, Forced Assimilation, and Western Supply Chains,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/connecting-dots-xinjiang-forced-labor-forced-assimilation-and-western-supply-chains>.

Although the international community has taken some small steps to respond to the repression, criticism has been mostly mild, if not entirely muted. Governments have an obligation to call out these abuses loudly and often. The Chinese government has been responsive, albeit defensively, to public statements of concern and condemnation, but like-minded governments who understand the implications of tacitly allowing this kind of behavior must cooperate in calling out the abuse. Without a robust response, the Uyghur identity itself—in which religion plays a significant role—will be under an ever graver threat.

## II. Sources and Methodology

The scope of this report was constrained by some difficulties accessing information from East Turkistan—an environment less accessible to researchers, reporters, and advocates than most others in the world today.

However, we have pieced together a collection of stories from Uyghur imams and religious leaders who lived in East Turkistan from the 1960s until roughly 2016, and who experienced the trajectory of the Chinese government's repression of religious figures first-hand. As such, the report situates Uyghur religious leaders within the context of the Chinese government's relationship with Islam. We have chosen to focus our analysis on these imams because of what their fate tells us about the motivation and objective of Chinese leaders since the most recent period of forced assimilation, which began around 2014.

This is not a report about Uyghur religious freedom, *per se*. It does not attempt to comprehensively trace Chinese government restrictions on religious practice over many decades, nor does it offer an expansive study of the role of Islam in Uyghur life, though these themes run throughout. The report views these restrictions through the lens of Uyghur imams and other prominent religious figures over time. Furthermore, it attempts to illustrate the assault on prominent religious figures in particular, what this assault looks

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like in its implementation, and the results for Uyghurs and others on the ground.

The report offers one more piece of a larger puzzle that researchers, activists, journalists, and governments have been attempting to piece together—particularly since 2016, when information was already hard to come by. The complete puzzle may never be fully assembled, but our collective work contributes to a clearer picture of life for Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in East Turkistan today.

We conducted a total of five telephone interviews for this report from August to November 2020. Four of our interviewees are former imams from East Turkistan; one is the family member of a detained imam. All interviewees worked in either official or unofficial capacities at local mosques across East Turkistan and are now residing abroad. We have used pseudonyms to conceal their identities at their request, as all expressed fear of retaliation for speaking publicly.

To compile the dataset of cases of detention and imprisonment, we used data from four sources: (1) the Uyghur Transitional Justice Database (UTJD);<sup>22</sup> (2) the Xinjiang Victims Database (Shahit.biz);<sup>23</sup> (3) data compiled in the diaspora by Uyghur scholar and researcher Abduweli Ayup;<sup>24</sup> and (4) information gleaned from additional open-source materials online.<sup>25</sup> We provide additional information regarding the compilation of cases and our methods at the end of Section III.

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<sup>22</sup> Uyghur Transitional Justice Database: [www.utjd.org](http://www.utjd.org).

<sup>23</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database: <https://www.shahit.biz/eng>.

<sup>24</sup> Uyghur scholar and researcher Abduweli Ayup has been able to track down an extensive list of detained imams through various public and private sources beginning in 2018. These sources include direct contacts, leaked documents such as the “Qaraqash List” and the “Aksu List,” and documents sourced from Chinese government websites. His organization, Uyghur Yardem, based in Norway, conducted interviews with Uyghurs in Istanbul between December 2019 and May 2020, and compiled a list of 4577 cases of detention and imprisonment.

<sup>25</sup> These sources include the Congressional Executive Commission on China's political prisoner database, reports from journalists, and other sources.

## Notes on terminology

In Islam, an imam is the worship leader of a mosque, but may also perform other duties in the local community. The report takes a relatively broad definition of “imam” as a religious figure in Uyghur society to include those officially sanctioned by the Party-state; those who self-identify as an imam, but do not hold an official designation with the government; and those who engage in teaching (or leading prayer) outside the family home.

In addition to imams, we have also included *khatibs*, *talibs*, and *mollas* in our dataset. A “khatib” is an imam who typically leads Friday or Eid prayer, whereas “talib” refers to religious students. We have chosen to include talibs in our dataset given that these figures are often studying to become imams, though they make up a small proportion of those detained. A “molla” is a more flexible category in our dataset, as there are no clear-cut qualifications for someone to be called by that name in the Uyghur community. As scholar Elke Spiessens points out, “In a basic sense, a Uyghur molla is a Muslim intellectual, someone who has specialized knowledge about Islam and is thereby bestowed a certain level of authority.”<sup>26</sup> Some individuals in the dataset were listed by compilers as “damollas,” advanced Islamic scholars with the authority to train other scholars who were “often much sought after by students from all over Xinjiang.”<sup>27</sup> Some interviewees also used the term *sheikh*, which refers in some cases to knowledgeable Uyghur religious scholars or in some cases to leaders of Sufi groups or custodians of shrines. Throughout the report, we use the phrasings *religious leaders*, *religious figures*, and *clergy* interchangeably to represent these broad categories.

Uyghur women also take up leading roles in religious affairs and teaching as *büwi* who “serve as mourners at funerals” as well as conducting home-based rituals for healing and reciting the Qur’an at religious gatherings.<sup>28</sup> Büwi — also called *qushnach* in some areas — lead women’s religious gatherings including mourning rituals and

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<sup>26</sup> Spiessens, “Diasporic Lives of Uyghur Mollas,” p. 279.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, Rachel and Yasin Muhpul. “Music of the Uyghurs.” In *The Turks*, Vol.6. (Istanbul: Yeni Türkiye Publications, 2002), pp. 542–49.

regular *khetme* gatherings, which include forms of *zikr* and Qur'anic readings. Büwis often provide a basic religious education for local children. Although our dataset does not explicitly include cases of Uyghur büwi who have been detained, it is very likely that they have been targeted for persecution as well, given the detention of religious figures generally. Our dataset includes 23 women, some of whom may have acted in this capacity.

This report focuses on how policies have targeted Uyghur religious figures in East Turkistan in particular, while also recognizing that the same policies apply to other Turkic and/or Muslim peoples in the region. When we refer to Turkic peoples in this report, we are referring not only to Uyghurs, but also to Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tatars (though the latter two make up a much smaller percentage of the regional population). Kazakhs, for example, make up 18% of the detained population in our dataset, though their population only comprises roughly 7% of the total population and 12% of the Turkic population of the region.<sup>29</sup>

We use the terms “detained” or “in detention” to refer to those people who have been forcibly sent to camps. The Chinese government refers to these facilities as “re-education” or “vocational training” centers despite evidence illustrating their coercive nature. Not all facilities in this network are identical—evidence shows the varying degree to which Uyghurs and others are detained, the treatment they receive, the ability of internees to leave the facilities, and the length at which they are held.<sup>30</sup> One constant, however, is that strict coercion plays a fundamental role in this type of detention. We make a distinction between detained religious figures and those who have been arrested and sentenced to prison terms, using the term “imprisoned” to refer to the latter cases.

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<sup>29</sup> The high proportion of Kazakh imams in the dataset is likely a result of the work of the Atajurt Kazakh Human Rights Organization, a documentation organization based in Almaty which has conducted extensive interviews with Kazakhs connected to East Turkistan. The cases from Atajurt are reflected in the higher numbers of Kazakhs in the Shahit.biz database—one primary source for the dataset presented in this report.

<sup>30</sup> For detailed information about the nature of the arbitrary detention system in East Turkistan, see Uyghur Human Rights Project, “The Mass Internment of Uyghurs: ‘We want to be respected as humans. Is it too much to ask?’” August 23, 2018, <https://uhrp.org/report/mass-internment-uyghurs-we-want-be-respected-humans-it-too-much-ask-html/>.

## Who should read this report?

This report should be essential reading for **policy-makers** interested in pushing back against China's clear abrogation of fundamental human rights for Uyghurs; members of the **academic community**, who are increasingly shut out of the region to conduct research; the **Uyghur community** abroad, who continue to watch with horror as communication with family members and friends plunges further into darkness; **Muslims**—and members of all religious groups—around the world who recognize the importance that faith can play in maintaining bonds and living moral lives; and the **general public**, who are concerned about the systematic targeting of people for their faith, and for the assault on religious leaders who represent community cohesion and shared identity.

## III. Dataset on Detention of Religious Figures

### Key findings

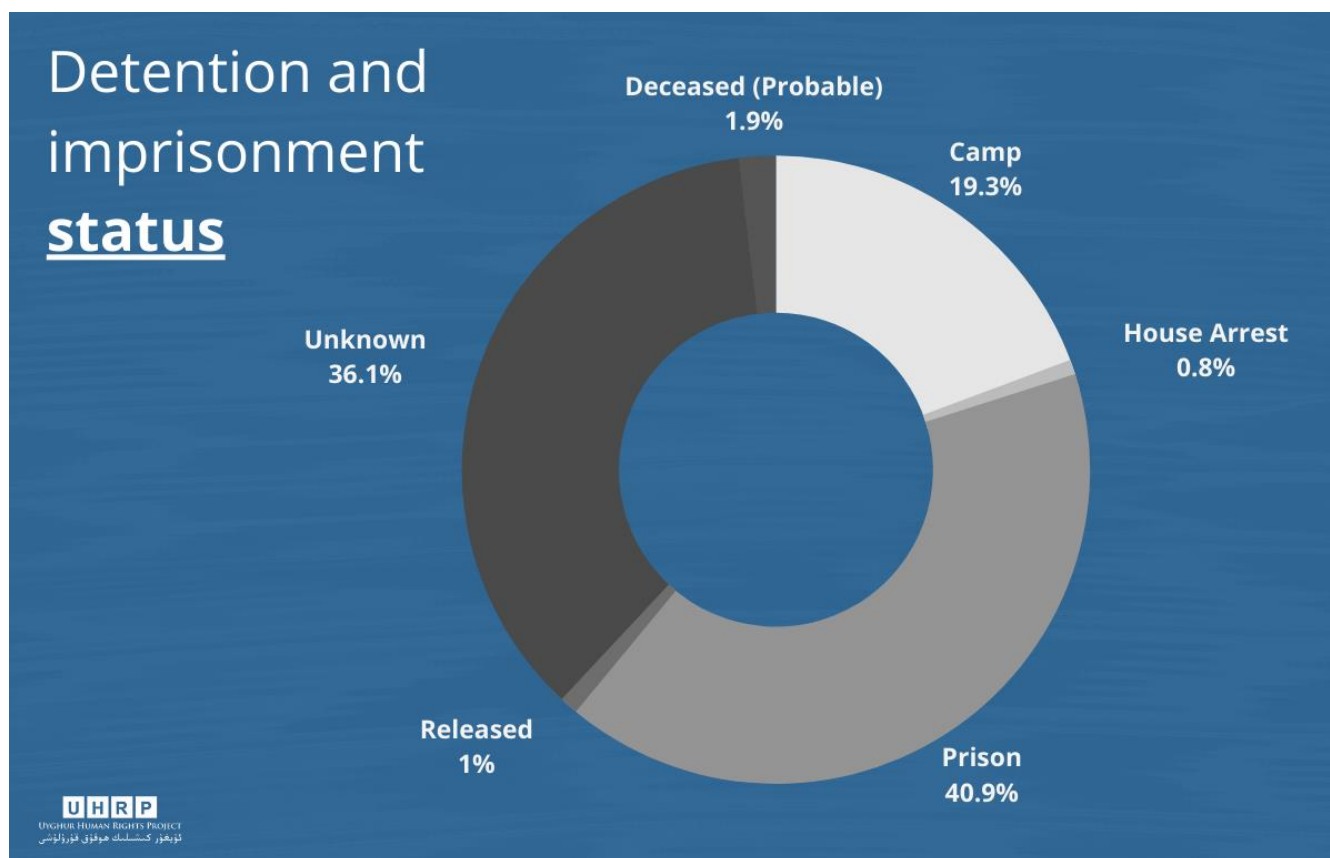
Following exhaustive research compiling cases from multiple databases,<sup>31</sup> we recorded a total of 1,046 Turkic religious figures who may have been detained in camps or prisons in East Turkistan primarily since 2014.<sup>32</sup> A small number of these individuals have been released, are now under house arrest, or have died in detention. The dataset includes 850 imams, 122 mollahs, 20 *muezzins* (those who perform the call to prayer), 33 talibs, and several others identified with different occupations, possibly because they gave up earlier duties as imams.

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<sup>31</sup> See "Notes on compilation of data" on page 28 for information on data sources.

<sup>32</sup> An additional 30 cases from 1999 to 2013 have also been included in the total 1,046, though the vast majority of individuals whose records we researched (571 of 601) were detained in or after 2014.





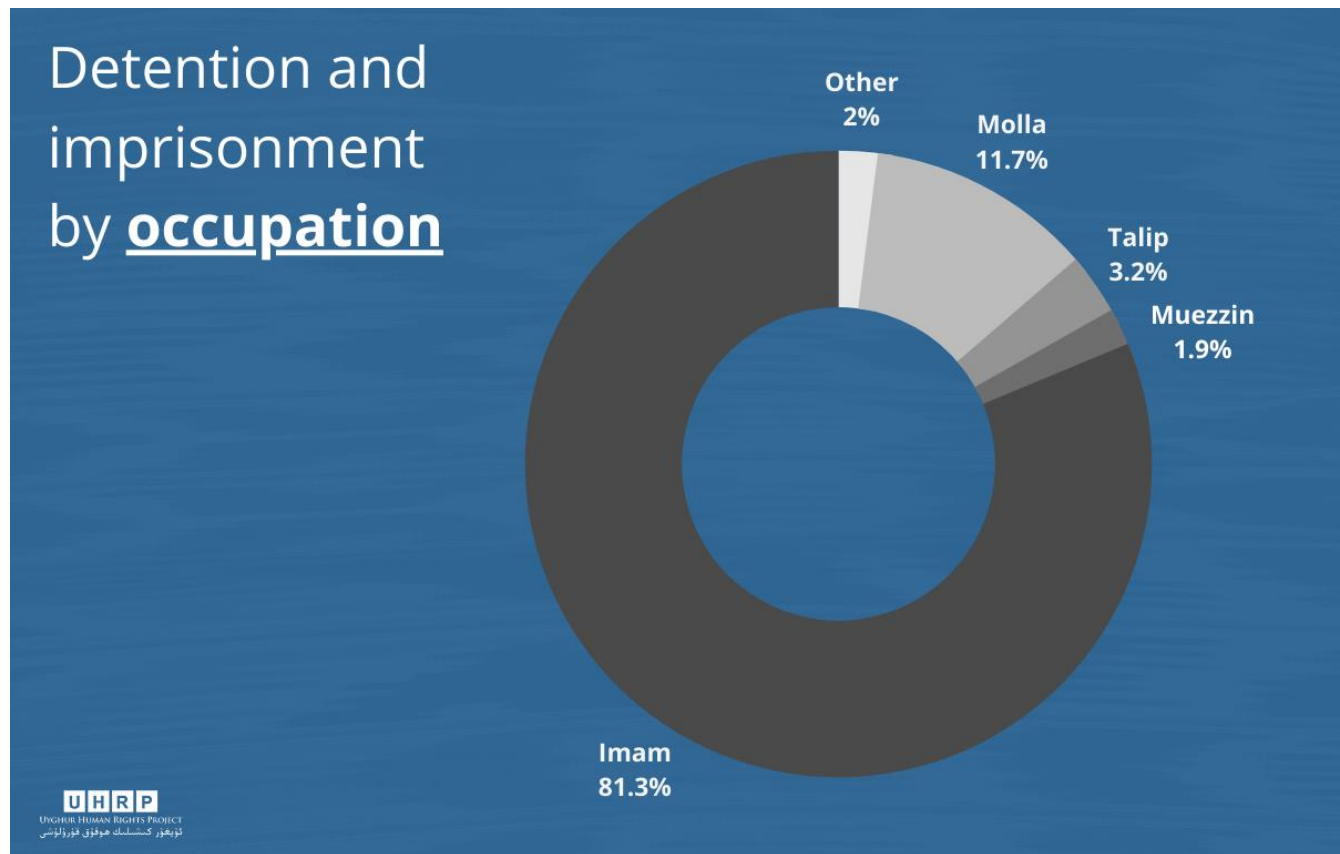
Of those people, 428 have been imprisoned, while 304 of those include information on the length of sentences currently being served (discussed in more detail below). Another 202 religious figures have been detained in camps,<sup>33</sup> 18 have been released (including 8 now under house arrest),<sup>34</sup> and 18 have died in either a prison or a camp, or shortly following their release.<sup>35</sup> An additional 378 cases we reviewed lack data on current status.

While a large number of cases (41%) indicate imprisonment, as opposed to detention in camps, the distinction between “prison,” “pre-trial detention,” and “re-education” is not absolutely clear. The

<sup>33</sup> Of these cases, 102 indicate that their current status (at the time of submission) is “prison or camp.” Given that none of these cases include sentencing data, we reason that they are more likely in camps than prison, and have treated these cases as such.

<sup>34</sup> Several Uyghur imams UHRP spoke to in the fall of 2020 told us that they or their families were living under conditions which effectively meant that they lived under “house arrest.” Although only eight cases explicitly mention house arrest, it may be fair to say that all 18 were living under the same conditions.

<sup>35</sup> Two of those who reportedly died in a prison or camp were in their 80s and one in his 90s at the time of their deaths.

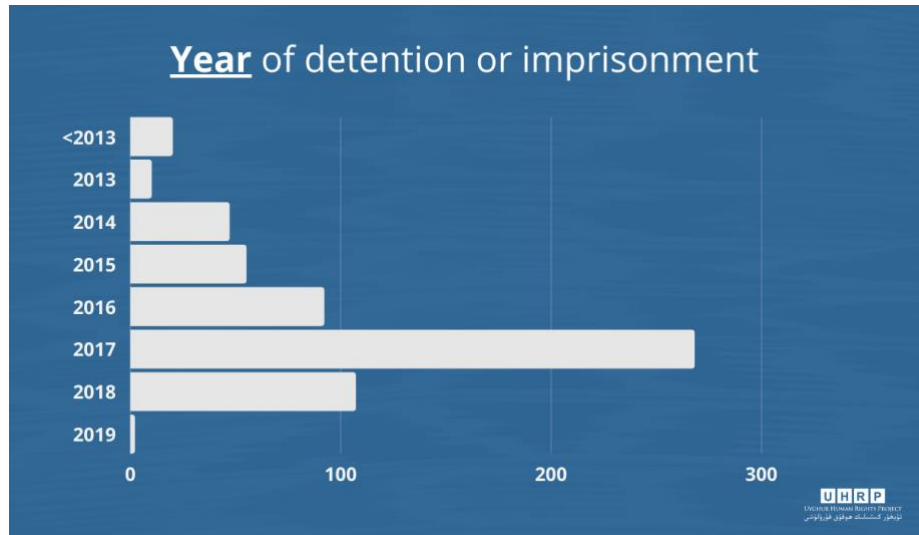


Chinese government does not make these distinctions clear, and many—if not all—of these cases are taking place outside any kind of formal judicial process. Around 9% of the submissions speak to this uncertainty however, noting that the individuals may be in either prisons or camps.

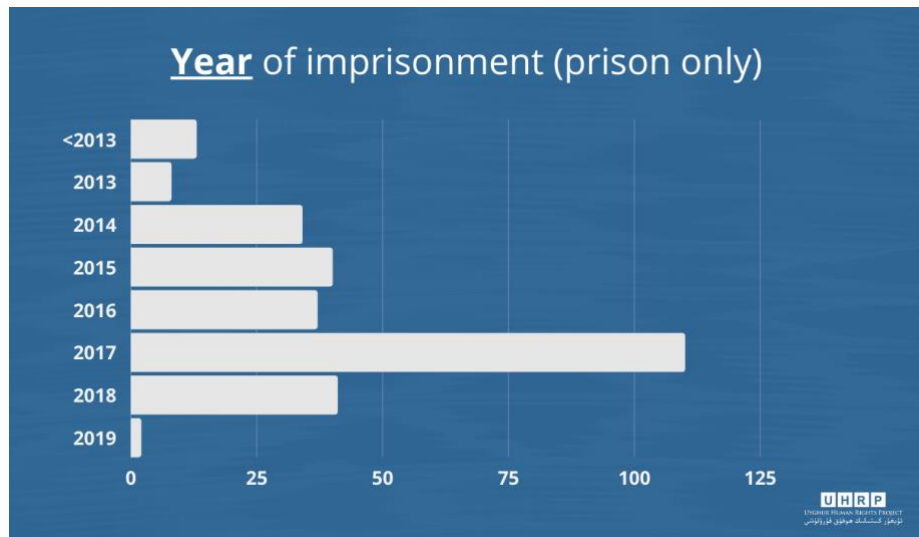
#### *Detentions and imprisonments over time*

Of the detentions we reviewed, 45% (of the 601 that included this information) occurred in 2017. Another 15% and 18% of detentions took place in 2016 and 2018, respectively. Nearly 19% of detentions took place between 2013 and 2015, ahead of more widespread incarceration beginning in 2016.

Data on prison sentences offers a similar picture of a build-up of detentions starting in 2014 and peaking in 2017, which tracks fairly consistently with government data reported by the New York



Times in 2019.<sup>36</sup> Our data shows a drop in prison sentences for religious figures from 2017 to 2018 when compared to government data. This may be partially explained by the government's targeting of religious figures for imprisonment earlier than the general population.<sup>37</sup> Another factor may be a lack of data, considering that lines of communication from East Turkistan to the rest of the world began to close around this time.

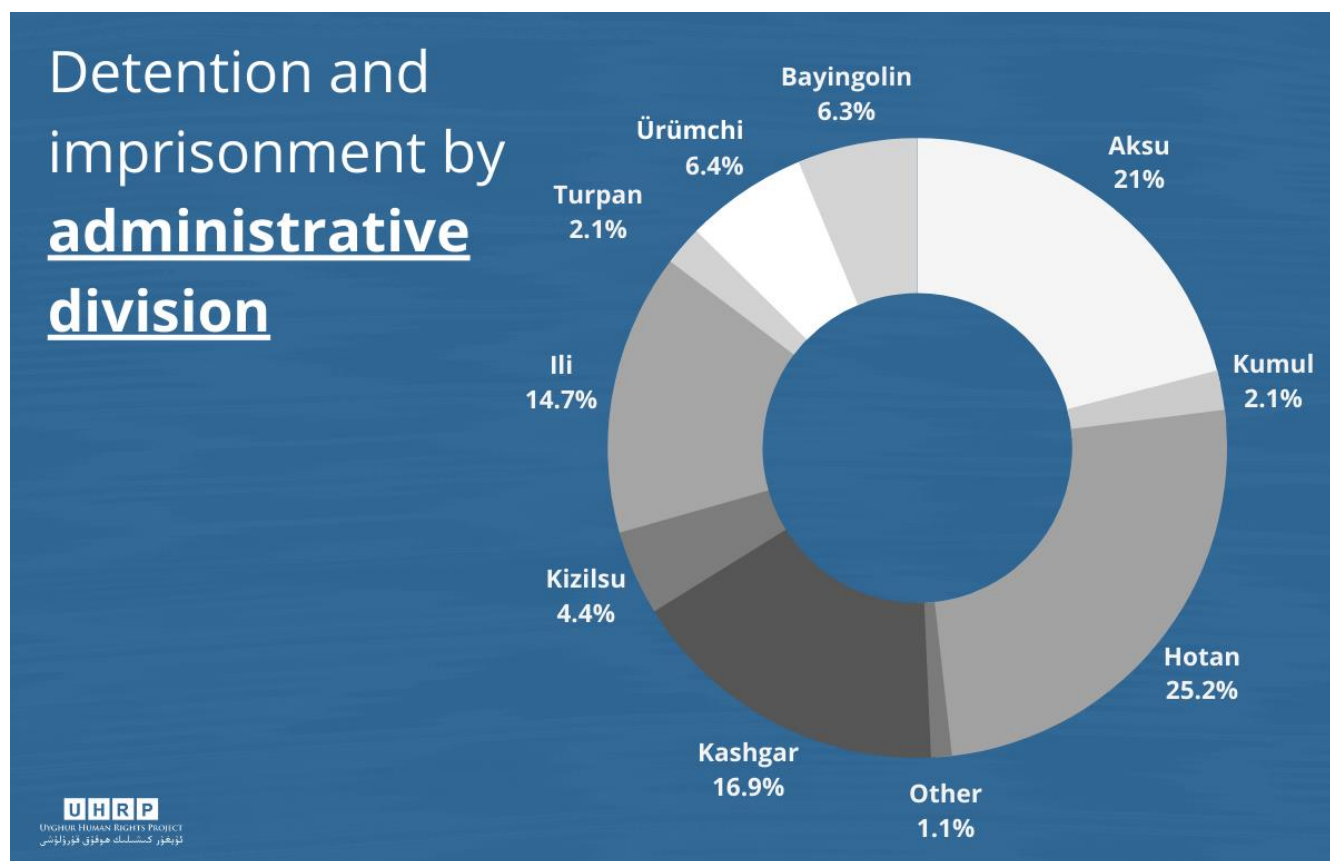


<sup>36</sup> Chris Buckley, "China's Prisons Swell After Deluge of Arrests Engulfs Muslims."

<sup>37</sup> See Asim Kashgarian, "Victims' Families Say Uyghur Religious Leaders Main Target in China," *Voice of America*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/victims-families-say-uyghur-religious-leaders-main-target-china>.

## *Detentions and imprisonments by prefecture and other administrative divisions*

Detentions occurred at the highest rates in southern areas with high Turkic populations where the regional government has focused its repressive policies: Hotan (25%), Aksu (21%), and Kashgar (17%). Ili prefecture, in the northern part of the region, accounts for a further 15% of the cases we reviewed. Lower levels of detention in all other prefectures indicate that the detention policy remains widespread. Of those detained, the vast majority are Uyghur (843 cases, 81%), but also included Kazakh (187 cases, 18%), Kyrgyz (12 cases, 1%), a



single Uzbek case (0.1%), and a single Tatar case (0.1%). Despite making up only 12% of the Turkic population in the region, Kazakhs make up a comparably larger proportion of the dataset, given that



imams make up a large percentage of the Kazakhs who have been detained.<sup>38</sup>

### *Detentions and imprisonments by sex*

Though the targeted individuals in our dataset are overwhelmingly male (98%), the records also include information on 23 women (2%) detained in camps and imprisoned, some for “teaching Islam to children.” Many of the women are labelled as mollas or imams (both male-gendered terms), but it is more likely that they would be considered *büwi* by their communities. Büwi take up leading roles in religious affairs and teaching, but may not have been classified by the government or regarded by the submitter of cases as official religious practitioners. It is possible that they are underrepresented in our data.

### *Detentions and imprisonments by age*

Detained religious figures in our dataset were primarily born between 1965 and 1975 (44% of cases which include this data). Large numbers of clergy born in the 1950s and 1980s were also detained, however. Stunningly, authorities have also rounded up elderly Uyghurs as well, particularly those who hold some level of influence in their communities. Our data includes 15 cases of Uyghur religious figures who were detained when they were already over the age of 70 since 2014—including three over the age of 90. Suleyman Tohti, a well-known Uyghur molla from Kizilsu was reportedly detained in 2017, allegedly 86 years old at the time, and died in police custody.<sup>39</sup>

These cases are consistent with reporting on detentions of elderly Uyghurs across the region, including the 78-year-old mother and 80-year-old father of World Uyghur Congress President Dolkun

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<sup>38</sup> One other reason for the disproportionate number of Kazakhs represented is the considerable number of cases entered into the Shahit.biz database, which compiled a large number of cases from Kazakhstan from family members of detained individuals. There is also evidence that non-Turkic peoples, including Hui, have been detained. See also Gene Bunin, “Xinjiang’s Hui Muslims Were Swept Into Camps Alongside Uyghurs,” *Foreign Policy*, February 10, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/10/internment-detention-xinjiang-hui-muslims-swept-into-camps-alongside-uyghur/>.

<sup>39</sup> The Turkish media report from the Uyghur media organization Istiqlal noted that he was 86 at the time of his death: <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=4792>.



Isa—both of whom died after being sent to camps.<sup>40</sup> Another prominent case is that of 82-year-old Uyghur Islamic scholar Muhammed Salih Hajim, who first translated the Qur'an into the Uyghur language in a government-approved project and died 40 days after being detained in late 2017 or early 2018.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Uyghur writer Nurmuhhammad Tohti, who was 70 years old and suffering from health problems at the time of his detention, died after being held in a camp for approximately five months.<sup>42</sup>

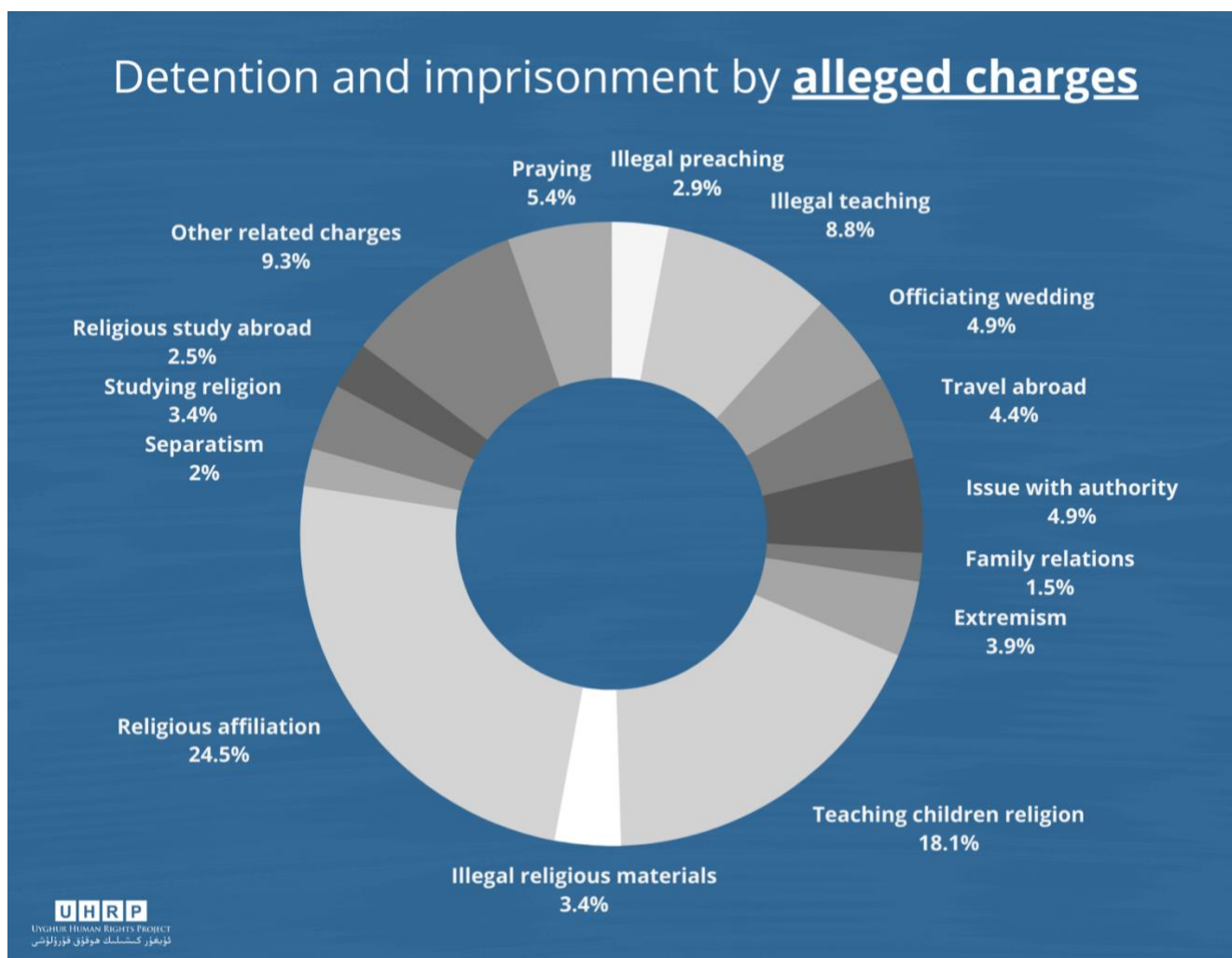
### *Reasons for detention*

The data we reviewed provide information on the basis for detention in 313 (30%) of total cases, regardless of whether the individual was imprisoned or detained. The most frequently cited reason for detention in camps and imprisonment is simply for

<sup>40</sup> Radio Free Asia, "Targeted by Chinese Smear Campaign, Uyghur Leader Learns of Father's Death," *Radio Free Asia*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/activist-father-01152020211855.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Radio Free Asia, "Uyghur Muslim Scholar Dies in Chinese Police Custody," *Radio Free Asia*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/scholar-death-01292018180427.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Alison Flood, "Uighur author dies following detention in Chinese 're-education' camp," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/19/uighur-author-dies-following-detention-in-chinese-re-education-camp>.



“being an imam,” which may suggest that the testifiers who supplied the information may be speculating in some cases, given an understanding that any kind of religious affiliation may be grounds for detention.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, many other entries did not include detailed information on the rationale for detention in camps, but given what we know about the detention of religious figures over time, we make the reasonable assumption that holding a current or past position as an imam fits the criteria. A secondary

<sup>43</sup> Recent leaks from Aksu prefecture, reported by Human Rights Watch, confirm some of these suspicions. See Human Rights Watch, “China: Big Data Program Targets Xinjiang’s Muslims,” December 9, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/09/china-big-data-program-targets-xinjiangs-muslims>. The “Qaraqash List” document also revealed that religious affiliations may lead to detention, though it was not the leading cause. See Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Ideological Transformation: Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan,” February 2020, [https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP\\_QaraqashDocument.pdf](https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP_QaraqashDocument.pdf).

reason for camp detention relates to travel or communication abroad.

The data on prison sentences offer more clues about the basis for detention and sentencing. Many of the recorded charges are difficult to categorize as the substance of the charges overlap, but we have identified several general trends. Firstly, the most common category appears to be closely related to “illegal teaching,” “illegal preaching,” or “teaching religion to children” (61 cases, 30% of all charges)—something raised by several of the imams we spoke to in the diaspora. Efforts to break the links between previous generations’ religious knowledge have strengthened considerably since the 1980s. The data we reviewed suggest that this remains a particular strategy for the government. Other cases simply relate to the “religious affiliation” (50 cases, 25%) of the individuals, which can include “spreading religious propaganda,” “being an imam” and even simply having a religious education. Additional grounds for imprisonment include private acts like officiating or preaching at weddings (10 cases, 5%); praying (11 cases, 5%); travel or communication abroad (9 cases, 4%); and possessing or distributing “illegal religious materials” (7 cases, 3%).





Although the Chinese government often refers to the aforementioned behavior as “illegal” or “extremist,” the definitions of terms like these are ambiguous, likely by design.<sup>44</sup> What is clear from the data is that Uyghur and other Turkic Islamic clergy have been sentenced to prison terms for behavior that does not come close to what might be considered “illegal” in any other jurisdiction. A cursory look at some of the details gives one an idea of what is considered “illegal” and worthy of a prison sentence:

- Three-year sentence for “Rejecting the Chinese government's earthquake-resistant house-building projects.”
- Four-year, six-month sentence for “Religious extremism” for advocating for the separation of men and women at ceremonies like weddings.
- Five-year sentence for “not turning sickles, axes, and knives in to the village in a timely manner.”
- Five-year sentence for “conducting a marriage based on a false marriage certificate.”
- Seven-year sentence for “sending his child to Egypt to study [religion].”
- Eight-year, six-month sentence for “terrorism and extremism” for officiating a wedding in a mosque.
- Ten-year sentence for “praying in a group and reciting scripture.”
- Ten-year sentence for “distributing the recitation of scripture on memory cards.”
- Fourteen-year sentence for “watching a disc with religious extremist content.”
- Fifteen-year sentence for “helping children who studied illegally and for helping those who wanted to go abroad.”

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<sup>44</sup> A group of UN Special Rapporteurs and two Working Groups sent a letter to the Chinese government on November 1, 2019, expressing concern over the use of “extremism” and “terrorism,” stating that “[v]ague and arbitrary definitions raise concerns of the conflation of religious extremism and terrorism considering that many Uyghurs have been jailed and convicted on charges related to public displays of Uyghur culture or Islam more generally.” See UN Special Procedures Joint Other Letter to China, OL CHN 18/2019, November 1, 2019, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24845>.

- Seventeen-year sentence for “teaching others to pray and listening to tabligh [propagation of Islamic faith] on a memory card.”
- Twenty-year sentence for “studying for six months in Egypt, teaching children, and attempting to split the motherland.”
- Twenty-year sentence for “refusing to hand in his Quran book to be burned.”
- Twenty-five-year sentence “on the grounds that he did not prevent schoolchildren from entering the mosque, preaching and increasing the crowd.” The submitter testified that “He preached only with the help of books published with the permission of the Chinese government.”
- Life sentence for “spreading the faith and for organizing people.”

Although we could not independently verify the above cases, we find them consistent with the spike in prison sentences generally across the region, particularly sentences over five years.<sup>45</sup> Of the 304 cases that included data on the length of sentences, 96% included sentences of at least five years, including 25% of whom were sentenced for 20 years or more.

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<sup>45</sup> See Chris Buckley, “China’s Prisons Swell After Deluge of Arrests Engulfs Muslims.” Buckley notes, “During 2017 alone, Xinjiang courts sentenced almost 87,000 defendants, 10 times more than the previous year, to prison terms of five years or longer.” For a more recent report on prison sentencing in the region, see also Maya Wang, “China: Baseless Imprisonments Surge in Xinjiang,” Human Rights Watch, February 24, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/24/china-baseless-imprisonments-surge-xinjiang>.



## Case Study 1: Abidin Ayup

Abidin Ayup is a respected religious leader and former imam of the Qayraq Mosque in Atush for around 30 years, and worked as a professor at the Xinjiang Islamic Institute before retiring around 20 ago. He is over 90 years old.<sup>46</sup>

Available evidence shows that he was likely detained in a camp sometime between January and April 2017. A court document refers to him as “an inheritor of religious extremist thought” and “a key person for reform through education,” suggesting that he was detained for his religious background. The court verdict also indicated that he was already in poor health as of May 2017.<sup>47</sup>

According to testimony to the Xinjiang Victims Database, he is presumably detained in Kizilsu.

## Once favored, now threatened

Many of the imams in the dataset received government sanction to work in official religious capacities at some point in the years before the same government began harassing and detaining them. We counted 30 religious figures that testifiers explicitly mention were once officially approved by the government. However, given that the regional government mandated an approval process for all imams in the early 1990s,<sup>48</sup> it is likely that the number of formally-approved religious figures is much higher. One imam from Kizilsu, for example, who was allegedly detained for refusing to drink

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<sup>46</sup> Radio Free Asia, “Ninety-Year-Old Uyghur Imam Confirmed Detained in Xinjiang But Condition Unknown,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/imam-01222020130927.html>.

<sup>47</sup> 新疆维吾尔自治区克孜勒苏柯尔克孜自治州中级人民法院刑事裁定书 [Kizilsu Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture Intermediate People's Court Criminal ruling], July 1, 2019, archived at <https://archive.fo/mNrdp>.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang — China's Muslim Far Northwest* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 73.

alcohol, actually graduated from the Xinjiang Islamic Institute in 1998, and worked as a state-approved imam until 2014 or 2015. Another who graduated from the same institute in 2005 worked as an imam in Bayingolin prefecture, attended “patriotic education” courses in Korla and Ürümqi, and was said to have even been appointed the leader of an official Hajj trip to Mecca in 2016. He was arrested the following year and sentenced to 10 years in prison for being an “economic supporter” of terrorism for transferring money to a businessman who was later detained by the police on unclear charges.

An imam from Ili prefecture, Aqytzhan Batyr, was also sent to a camp in 2018 before being sentenced to at least 17 years in prison in May 2019, possibly for visiting Kazakhstan.<sup>49</sup> The imam was quoted in Chinese media in 2016 saying, “We have truly realized the danger of illegal religion; we firmly stand against illegal religious activities. As a patriotic religious person, I will promote it and make sure religious people understand the harm of illegal religious activities and live a good life.”<sup>50</sup> In another particularly egregious case, Abduheber Ahmet—a state-approved imam favored by officials in Bayingolin prefecture—was sentenced to five and a half years in prison in 2017 for taking his son to a non-government-approved religious school five years earlier. The local township’s Party Secretary told Radio Free Asia, “He took [his son] there so that his son would meet and play with other children,” and that he was given leniency in his sentence for admitting to it.<sup>51</sup>

**Abduheber Ahmet—a state-approved imam favored by officials in Bayingolin prefecture—was sentenced to five and a half years in prison in 2017 for taking his son to a non-government-approved religious school five years earlier.**

<sup>49</sup> Radio Free Asia, “新疆塔城—伊斯兰教伊玛目被重囚十七年,” *Radio Free Asia*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shaoshuminzu/q11-09252019064124.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Du Hong, “我县举办学习贯彻党的十八届五中全会、自治区党委八届十次全委（扩大）会议、地委扩大会议精神专题培训班” [Our county holds special training courses for studying and implementing the Fifth Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Party, the Tenth Plenary (Expanded) Meeting of the Eighth Party Committee of the Autonomous Region, and the Spirit of the Expanded Meeting of the Prefectural Committee], *Shawan News*, February 23, 2016, archived at [archive.is/fE0Go](http://archive.is/fE0Go).

<sup>51</sup> Radio Free Asia, “Xinjiang Authorities Jail Uyghur Imam Who Took Son to Unsanctioned Religious School,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 10, 2018, [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/imam-05102018155405.html](http://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/imam-05102018155405.html).



## Case Study 2: Ablajan Bekri

Ablajan Bekri was the *hatip* (Friday imam) of the Qaraqash Grand Mosque and held multiple leadership positions in the government, including deputy chairman of the Qaraqash County Political Consultative Conference, vice president of the Hotan Prefecture Islamic Committee, and president of the Qaraqash County Islamic Committee.<sup>52</sup>

He was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to 25 years in prison for “violating the law,” but specific charges remain unclear. His case is included in the leaked Qaraqash Document, which mentions him 17 times in relation to other victims, many of whom were his students arrested for their relationship to him.<sup>53</sup> According to testimony to the Xinjiang Victims Database, he is presumably detained in Ürümchi.

## Charges for past behavior/actions

Another troubling trend in the data, reflected in Ahmet’s case, is the tendency for the government to imprison and sentence individuals retroactively for things that took place years prior and that the government had subsequently deemed “illegal.” Some of these cases involve Hajj pilgrimages (simply having gone on Hajj may put one in a high-risk category for detention),<sup>54</sup> as well as travel abroad in the past. Travel to certain “sensitive countries” has also been cited as a reason for detention in camps,<sup>55</sup> though it remains unclear how

<sup>52</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database, Entry 10155: [shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=10155](http://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=10155).

<sup>53</sup> See Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Ideological Transformation”: Records of mass detention from Qaraqash, Hotan,” February 2020, [https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP\\_QaraqashDocument.pdf](https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP_QaraqashDocument.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China: Big Data Program Targets Xinjiang’s Muslims,” December 9, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/09/china-big-data-program-targets-xinjiangs-muslims>.

<sup>55</sup> The countries are Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Thailand, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and



far into a person's past the government might look for a justification for detention.

Several individual cases in the dataset also stand out, including:

- an imam who was sent to prison for “preaching in a cemetery 10 years ago”;
- an imam (now deceased) who was detained in 2014 for preaching at a wedding in 2010; and
- an imam from Ili prefecture who was said to have been sentenced to 20 years in prison for group prayer in 2009.

Sentences for “being an imam” also fit into the category of charges for past actions or behavior, given that “being an imam” could indicate that simply having been an imam at some point in the past may be grounds for detention or sentencing.

## **Guilt by association**

Similar to the familial “circles” by which individuals are deemed threatening in the leaked Qaraqash Document,<sup>56</sup> cases in the dataset also indicate that many have been detained simply for associations with “suspicious” figures like religious leaders. The role of guilt by association in the detention and sentencing of imams is further corroborated by Abduqeyyum, who noted in an interview, “Anyone with connections to me ended up detained”). Six cases in our dataset mention family or other relationships as grounds for detention in camps or prison, including a man whose father officiated a wedding, a man whose brother was an imam and traveled abroad, and two others who were detained as part of a larger “religious family.”

Guilt by association and collective punishment are not new phenomena for Uyghurs, even for those residing abroad. Researchers have shown the Chinese government has taken a

**Researchers have shown the Chinese government has taken a vindictive, even vengeful, line against family members of the Uyghur community in the diaspora**

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Yemen. See Human Rights Watch, “Eradicating Ideological Viruses,” September 2018, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/china0918\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/china0918_web.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> The Qaraqash Document is a leaked document dated to around June 2019 containing in-depth information about the familial and social circles of internees from eight neighborhoods in Qaraqash county, in Hotan prefecture. See Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Ideological Transformation”: Records of mass detention from Qaraqash, Hotan,” February 2020, [https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP\\_QaraqashDocument.pdf](https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP_QaraqashDocument.pdf).

vindictive, even vengeful, line against family members of the Uyghur community in the diaspora—either for their activism, or simply for residing abroad.<sup>57</sup> Several of the imams we interviewed spoke in specific terms about the way in which the government targeted their family and even loose associates. The trend is all the more egregious given that the “charges” many Uyghur religious leaders face are either baseless or wholly disproportionate.



### Case Study 3: Ahmet Metniyaz

Ahmet Metniyaz was the imam of Langer Mosque of Aksu city and a well-known Uyghur religious scholar who was once the general secretary of Aksu Islamic Religious Association.

In 2015, the regional government awarded Mr. Ahmet a “model of ethnic unity and progress” prize by regional government, and regularly quoted him in the Chinese press supporting government policies regarding religion.<sup>58</sup> He was also one of 90 religious scholars who were received by the regional Party Secretary, Chen Guanguo, on November 30, 2016, where he gave a speech with eight other scholars and imams (see below).

According to witness testimony, he was sent to a camp at the beginning of 2017, and at the end of 2017 was sentenced to 25 years in prison on unclear charges.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Amnesty International (February 21, 2020). “China: Uyghurs living abroad tell of campaign of intimidation,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/china-uyghurs-living-abroad-tell-of-campaign-of-intimidation/>. For earlier accounts of harassment and intimidation, see also Paul Mooney and David Lague “Holding the fate of families in its hands, China controls refugees abroad,” December 30, 2015, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-uyghur/>.

<sup>58</sup> See 新疆各地穆斯林群众正在安度祥和斋月 (Muslims all over Xinjiang are enjoying peaceful Ramadan) (July 15, 2015), archived at <https://archive.vn/D4WqM#selection-249.0-262.0>.

<sup>59</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database, Entry 9035: <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=9005>.



Ahmet Metniyaz (left) with regional Party Secretary, Chen Guanguo (right), pose for a photo during a symposium of “Islamic patriotic religious figures” on November 30, 2016. Screenshot: XJTV.

## Notes on compilation of data

As a product of some of the research limitations outlined in Section II. (pp. 8–11), the dataset presented must be understood in the context of the many unknowns about the situation in East Turkistan today—from the implementation of policies by the regional government to the impact on individuals registered in the dataset.

The dataset is derived primarily from four sources: (1) the Uyghur Transitional Justice Database (UTJD);<sup>60</sup> (2) the Xinjiang Victims Database (Shahit.biz);<sup>61</sup> (3) data compiled in the diaspora by

<sup>60</sup> Uyghur Transitional Justice Database: [www.utjd.org](http://www.utjd.org).

<sup>61</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database: <https://www.shahit.biz/eng>.

Uyghur scholar and researcher Abduweli Ayup;<sup>62</sup> and (4) information gleaned from additional open-source materials online.<sup>63</sup>

Although evidence collected in several public and private databases shows many Uyghurs have been detained in camps or given prison sentences for “teaching Islam to children,” these cases lie outside the ambit of the report, which focuses on individuals who served as religious leaders in both official and unofficial capacities. Cases that involve the charge of “teaching Islam to children” remain in the current dataset, however, if they have been expressly identified as religious figures by testifiers.

The list we compiled of those detained, disappeared, or sentenced is by no means exhaustive. Though our conclusions are based on a dataset which has been compiled as thoroughly as possible, we recognize the pitfalls of the source of the data, which in this case is second-hand information submitted primarily by members of the Uyghur diaspora. The Uyghur diaspora are typically the only sources able to gather information, albeit limited, about their family and friends in East Turkistan. We have taken steps to corroborate this information, which we describe in further detail below.

The fluidity of the situation on the ground may further affect the authenticity of the source data. Many of the cases have been reported since 2017, and given that communication in and out of East Turkistan remains very difficult, it is often difficult to ascertain whether some may have been released from camps since their initial detention. Although there is some evidence that a small proportion of the interned population has been released, releases are likely not widespread. As one database source has noted, “Contrary to claims by the regional authorities that the detainees have been released, we have only observed a very small number of confirmed releases.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Uyghur scholar and researcher Abduweli Ayup has been able to track down an extensive list of detained imams through various public and private sources beginning in 2018. These sources include direct contacts, leaked documents such as the “Qaraqash List” and the “Aksu List,” and from scouring Chinese government websites. His organization, Uyghur Yardem, based in Norway, conducted interviews with Uyghurs in Istanbul between December 2019 and May 2020 and compiled a list of 4577 cases of detention in prison or camps.

<sup>63</sup> These sources include the Congressional Executive Commission on China's political prisoner database, reports from journalists, and other sources.

<sup>64</sup> Uyghur Transitional Justice Database: [www.utjd.org](http://www.utjd.org).

We have chosen to leave 10 “release cases” in our dataset, given that many have been released and subsequently re-arrested, and because they provide clues for reasons the authorities gave for detaining these individuals.

A third hurdle is the paucity of information contained in the submissions or the compilation of the data itself. Although the cases contain enough information to make a reasonable assessment of various trends, many case details are either missing or uncertain. Nevertheless, all 1,046 cases include a name, occupation, and gender (100%); 925 (88%) include the prefecture; 668 (64%) include information about status at the time of reporting (prison, camp, released, house arrest, deceased); 601 (57%) include information about the month or year of detention or disappearance; 595 (57%) include the birth year; 313 (30%), the reason for detention or sentencing; 247 (24%), the place of detention or sentencing; and 186 (18%), information about the mosque where the religious figure was once affiliated.

As a result of these unknowns, we have taken steps to corroborate the data where possible, through cross-referencing entries with multiple testimonies and with reporting by investigative journalists and researchers. Of all of the cases in the dataset, 105 were attested to by at least two sources, while the remainder were submitted by just one source. We acknowledge that multiple testimonies about the same individual from different databases and other sources may have been submitted by a single source in some cases.

To address the lack of direct corroboration in some cases, we compared prefectural detention rates in our dataset with the percentage of Turkic peoples of the entire region (Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar) living in each prefecture.<sup>65</sup> The percentages of those detained in nearly every prefecture from our dataset align relatively closely with Turkic peoples residing in each prefecture as a percentage of the total regional Turkic population. This tells us that the compiled cases are at least comparable to what one might expect if a similar proportion of Turkic peoples were detained across the entire region. For example, 14.7% of the individuals in our

**Despite these limitations, we consider the compiled data the most authoritative account of Uyghur clergy detained since around 2015, given that no other studies have attempted to assess this form of detention.**

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<sup>65</sup> These figures are based on the 2018 Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook.



dataset (of the cases which include residence data) reside in Ili, whereas the Turkic population makes up 15.6% of the total regional Turkic population. Similarly, 4.4% of our dataset is made up residents of Kizilsu, whereas the prefecture makes up 4.3% of the regional total of all Turkic peoples. One noticeable outlier was Kashgar prefecture, which makes up 16.9% of our data, in contrast to the Turkic population making up 32% of the total across the region. These lower statistics may be a result of heavier security measures in Kashgar, and the reduced ability of the Uyghur population to communicate outside the prefecture and the region.

Despite these limitations, we consider the compiled data the most authoritative account of Uyghur clergy detained since around 2014, given that no other studies have attempted to assess this form of detention. We have done our best to offer this information with as much transparency as possible, while ensuring Uyghurs in East Turkistan and abroad are kept safe from retaliation. For this reason, we have chosen not to release the dataset to the public.

These detention rates should not be construed as a representation of broader trends for all Turkic peoples in the region, given that religious figures have been targeted more aggressively by the government—even before 2015. Detention rates among Uyghur clergy might be comparable to the detention of the intellectual class, who have been targeted for their influence within society.<sup>66</sup>

## IV. Contemporary Religious Practices

While Uyghur Islamic practice has transformed considerably over time, CCP policies since the 1990s have markedly altered the range of acceptable (and “legal”) religious practice and expression.

In recent decades, and in spite of many restrictions, Uyghurs have typically practiced a form of Sunni Islam. While a majority of

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<sup>66</sup> Uyghur Human Rights Project, “UPDATE – Detained and Disappeared: Intellectuals Under Assault in the Uyghur Homeland,” May 21, 2019, <https://uhrp.org/report/update-detained-and-disappeared-intellectuals-under-assault-in-the-uyghur-homeland/>.

Uyghurs consider Islam as an integral part of their cultural identity, some lead more religious lives and others more secular ones.

Uyghur neighborhoods and villages have traditionally had a local mosque, where imams lead five daily prayers and deliver sermons, though a campaign to demolish or significantly alter these structures has been underway since at least 2016.<sup>67</sup> Older men would participate most consistently in the call to prayer, and outside city centers it was also common to see young men taking breaks from work, alone or in small groups, to pray at the proper times. Women who participate generally pray in private, and because of government restrictions since the 1990s, children under 18 are not allowed to enter mosques or participate in religious activities.<sup>68</sup>

Although imams were once selected by their own local communities and congregations, oversight for the training of imams in East Turkistan is now the exclusive responsibility of the state-run Islamic Association of China (IAC)—the body now overseen by the United Front Work Department responsible for administering CCP policy relating to Islam. Rather than providing a substantive religious education, the IAC aims to ensure loyalty to the CCP and manage the relationship between clergy and worshippers. According to the now-defunct State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), the primary qualification for state approval was that imams “love the motherland, support the socialist system and the leadership of the Communist Party of China, comply with national laws, [and] safeguard national unity, ethnic unity, and social stability.”<sup>69</sup>

Until 2017, there was only one officially sanctioned madrasa for training religious professionals in the entire region—the Ürümqi-based Xinjiang Islamic Institute, which includes the Xinjiang Islamic Scripture School. Faculty are government employees, and the institute’s curriculum is overseen by the CCP through the United Front Work Department. Since 2017, the regional government reportedly set up eight branches of the institute across East

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<sup>67</sup> Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Demolishing Faith”; Australian Strategic Policy Institute, “Cultural erasure.”

<sup>68</sup> The history of religious repression is explored in detail in Section V.

<sup>69</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, “CECC Annual Report 2012,” October 2012, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2012-annual-report>.

Turkistan for training religious clerics, likely as a means of more closely monitoring activities of Uyghur religious leaders and students. In order to qualify as an official imam and carry out the related duties, all candidates are required to graduate from one of these CCP-sanctioned institutes.<sup>70</sup>

Aside from strictly controlled religious activity at the mosque led by state-appointed imams, some Uyghurs also pray at *mazars*, Sufi shrines to Muslim saints that often consisting of a tomb to historic Uyghur figures which serves as a destination for pilgrims. Uyghur folklorist Rahile Dawut, who conducted extensive research on Uyghur religious culture and folklore until her disappearance in December 2017,<sup>71</sup> has noted that “[m]azar combines religious elements of Islam—by being ideologically based on worshipping Muslim saints—and elements rooted in popular beliefs with their orientation on pursuing ‘this-world-benefits.’”<sup>72</sup> Scholar Rian Thum calls the *mazar* “a point on the landscape that holds particular numinous authenticity, a connection to and presence of the divine that surpasses the sacredness even of the mosque as a physical structure.”<sup>73</sup> Since 2017, the shrines themselves have been systematically destroyed or desecrated by Chinese authorities, after many were gradually closed to pilgrims altogether over the last three decades.<sup>74</sup> Shrine pilgrimage—like many other Uyghur religious practices—has been deemed “illegal religious activity” and prohibited.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Liu Xin, “Islamic school in Xinjiang offers anti-extremism courses to imams,” *Global Times*, July 25, 2018, archived at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210409211226/https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1112288.shtml>.

<sup>71</sup> Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, “Star Scholar Disappears as Crackdown Engulfs Western China,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/world/asia/china-xinjiang-rahile-dawut.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Rahile Dawut, “Shrine Pilgrimage and Sustainable Tourism,” in *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*, ed. Beller-Hann et al. (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>73</sup> Rian Thum, “The Spatial Cleansing of Xinjiang: Mazar Desecration in Context,” *Made in China Journal*, August 24, 2020, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/08/24/the-spatial-cleansing-of-xinjiang-mazar-desecration-in-context/>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Rachel Harris, “Uyghur Heritage and the Charge of Cultural Genocide in Xinjiang,” Newlines Institute, September 24, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/uyghurs/uyghur-heritage-and-the-charge-of-cultural-genocide-in-xinjiang/>.

The most common religious observance among Uyghurs is refusal to eat foods that are non-halal (forbidden in Islam), such as pork. Uyghur restaurants in East Turkistan serve halal fare, and Uyghur people typically eat only at restaurants that serve such food. An official “anti-halal” campaign began in 2018, however, as officials in Ürümqi called on local officers to strengthen the “ideological struggle” and fight “halalification” in the region.<sup>76</sup>

Uyghurs also celebrate holidays that reflect Islamic, Turkic, and Persian influences, including Roza Héyt (Eid al-Fitr), Qurban Héyt (Eid al-Adha), Nowruz (Persian New Year), and Barat, a holiday involving a prayer vigil in the month before Ramadan. Other Uyghur religious celebrations feature practices led by imams, who preside at weddings (*toys*), circumcision ceremonies (*sunnet toys*), and funerary meals (*nezirs*). The celebrations variously entail prayer, oil sacrifice, animal sacrifice, and/or communal meals, and may be large-scale events with many in attendance. Mounting restrictions on these celebrations and life-cycle events have been documented.<sup>77</sup>

Many of these practices, rituals, and celebrations offer a glimpse into how Islam has colored and shaped Uyghur life, particularly over the past several decades. It is difficult, however, to capture just how quickly regional authorities have suppressed them over the same period. Although Uyghur religious figures are now facing an exceptionally restrictive, if not totalitarian, environment, a cyclical pattern of accommodation and repression has played out through the course of the region’s history, which is helpful in understanding how the situation got to where it is today.

## V. Uyghur Religious History

Today, a majority of Uyghurs see Islam as a central aspect of their identity, though Uyghur identities drawing on Islam (as all other identities) are highly complex, deeply entwined with ethnic and cultural identities influenced by shared histories and by internal

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<sup>76</sup> Lily Kuo, “Chinese authorities launch ‘anti-halal’ crackdown in Xinjiang.”

<sup>77</sup> Timothy Grose, “How the CCP Took over the Most Sacred of Uighur Rituals,” *ChinaFile*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/how-ccp-took-over-most-sacred-of-uighur-rituals>.

and external factors over time. According to scholars, Uyghurs today might identify their ethnicity in terms of no fewer than five separate components “with varying degrees of salience for specific individuals in particular circumstances.”<sup>78</sup>

Scholars contend that prior the arrival of Qing troops in the region in the 18th century, Uyghurs held “common cultural assumptions, patterns of social interaction, religious practices and moral values, a shared history, and an attachment to the land.”<sup>79</sup> In any case, shared religious beliefs among Uyghurs represent a primary defining feature today—one that is not easily dislocated.

The relative geographic isolation of East Turkistan over time also played a role in the development of unique local Islamic and folk-religious practices of the region,<sup>80</sup> but diversity within the region has long existed, as well. As Justin Rudelson notes, “In Xinjiang, this diversity was fostered throughout history by the great distances separating the oases from one another.”<sup>81</sup> Such religious diversity still exists today. As such, the people living in East Turkistan have a diverse religious history marked by practice of Buddhism, shamanism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity, prior to converting to Islam between the tenth and fifteenth centuries.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a dynamic period for religion in East Turkistan, as Uyghurs and others in the local Muslim populations practiced religion mostly unfettered, and were able to travel to other regions of Central Asia and beyond for additional religious education. Uyghurs continued to develop and utilize distinct education systems, influenced most notably by the Jadidist (*new method* education) movement—a Muslim reformist movement spreading across Central Asia in the late 19th century.

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<sup>78</sup> Graham Fuller and Jonathon Lipman, “Islam in Xinjiang,” p. 338. See also Dru Gladney, “Relational alterity: Constructing Dungan (hui), Uyghur, and Kazakh identities across China, Central Asia, and Turkey,” *History and Anthropology*, 9 (4), 445–77.

<sup>79</sup> Joanne Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance: Uyghur Identities and Uyghur-Han Relations in Contemporary Xinjiang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 4–5.

<sup>80</sup> For an overview of Uyghurs’ historical religious practices and identity formation over time, see Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Justin Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 24.



The Jadidist movement's influence in the region "rejected traditional canonical learning in favor of personal and national strengthening through modern education,"<sup>82</sup> as its methods combined religious education with modern studies of literature, history, math, and science.<sup>83</sup> Many of the Uyghurs who absorbed Jadidist thinking in the 1920s would later become involved in independence movements in the 1930s.<sup>84</sup>

Alongside schools set up by Jadidists, Islamic education was available to boys between the ages of 6 and 16 (and in some places to girls under 12) via the traditional institution of the *maktap*, informal schools at the mosque, teacher's homes, or wealthy community members' homes.<sup>85</sup> As Linda Benson writes of the educational opportunities at the time, "Local schools that only provided religious education were called in Uyghur '*kona mektep*,' while schools offering a partially secular education were referred to as '*yengi mektep*.'" <sup>86</sup> The curriculum, taught by an imam, was primarily religious and included instruction on religious festivals, Quranic verses, and some poetry. The larger oases of southern East Turkistan also supported madrasas, colleges attached to shrines and run as charitable foundations, of which there were dozens through the early 20th century.<sup>87</sup>

The early Republican period, following the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, would make little practical difference in the lives of Uyghurs as space remained open for some Islamic practices and local customs. This space began closing by the late 1920s, however, with the appointment of leaders less attuned to local grievances. Some Islamic practices were curtailed, including a ban on Hajj pilgrimage for local residents, and resistance emerged in Qumul and

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<sup>82</sup> Nabijan Tursun and James Millward, "Political History and Strategies of Control, 1884-1978," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. Frederick Starr (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 73.

<sup>83</sup> Sean Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's internal campaign against a Muslim minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 31.

<sup>84</sup> Joanne Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, p. 16-17.

<sup>85</sup> James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 146.

<sup>86</sup> Linda Benson, "Education and Social Mobility among Minority Populations," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. Frederick Starr (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 192.

<sup>87</sup> Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, pp. 146-48.

Hotan, leading to the establishment of the short-lived First East Turkistan Islamic Republic (1933–34). In the aftermath, the new leader in the region, warlord Sheng Shicai, took some steps to appease the local population, providing grain and monetary stipends to thousands of middle and low-ranked Islamic clergy, and allowing the Islamic court system to operate in parallel to the Chinese system in civil and minor criminal cases.<sup>88</sup>

Despite moderate accommodationist policies, some religious practices were still constrained out of fear that allowing the people to practice religion might lead to revolt. Nevertheless, the Second East Turkistan Republic emerged out of continued discontent with Chinese rule, beginning with a rebellion in the Ghulja region, supported by the Soviets. In the Second ETR (1945–49), Uyghur and Kazakh leaders exercised de facto control over Ghulja and were included in a coalition government with the Guomindang in Ürümchi. As Sean Roberts points out, “In many ways, the Xinjiang coalition government . . . represented the most accommodating administration to the region’s local Muslim population in modern history, including to this day.”<sup>89</sup>

Uyghurs and the local population experienced greater suppression of Islamic practice once again following the CCP occupation of East Turkistan in 1949. Restrictive policies were largely derived from the Marxist-Leninist approach of the CCP, which viewed religion as undesirable and “a potential source of political opposition and weakening influence on the socialist state.”<sup>90</sup> Similar to historical anxieties among rulers over time, the CCP regarded the role of religion and religious leaders as possible threats to Party rule because of their ability to unify and mobilize large segments of the population.<sup>91</sup> Scholars argue that Islam, and by extension, Islamic teaching, was (and remains) branded “a reactionary ideology and feudal throwback, at best a backward

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<sup>88</sup> Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, p. 247.

<sup>89</sup> Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, p. 41.

<sup>90</sup> Stephen E. Hess, “Islam, Local Elites, and China’s Missteps in Integrating the Uyghur Nation,” *USAK Yearbook of International Politics and Law*, 3 (2010): pp. 407–30.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

aspect of human society doomed to wither with progress and the advance of science.”<sup>92</sup>

H.H. Lai provides a useful framework for understanding changes in policy towards religion in China beginning around this period: “cooption” (1949–57), “vacillation” (1958–65), “prohibition” (1966–79), and “calculated monopoly” (post-1979). In the early- to mid-1950s, the Party-state provided some space for Islamic practice, allowing imams to retain their positions (albeit under strict control) and permitting Uyghurs to occupy positions that had been restricted to Han Chinese.<sup>93</sup> It was during this time, though, that the Party-state began to play an early role in codifying which elements of Islam were to be considered legal and legitimate. As noted by Rian Thum, in contrast to previous periods “the Communists aimed to replace the [Islamic court] system wholesale with state institutions” and “integrated religious institutions into a state-managed system, providing funding from government coffers, albeit at drastically lower levels.”<sup>94</sup>

In 1956, the Hundred Flower Movement invited criticism of the Party, and many Uyghurs spoke out against unfair treatment. In the anti-Rightist campaign that directly followed in 1957, those who had voiced complaints were targeted with arrest, especially Islamic leaders.<sup>95</sup> The CCP’s official Religious Reform Campaign simultaneously began the process of completely dismantling all Uyghur religious institutions and practices.<sup>96</sup>

Collectivization policies during the Great Leap Forward (1957–62) turned over mosque lands to the state, banned *mazar* festivals, and made Islamic practice nearly impossible. Repression would accelerate during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). As James Millward writes:

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<sup>92</sup> Graham Fuller and Jonathon Lipman, “Islam in Xinjiang,” p. 332.

<sup>93</sup> Rian Thum, “The Uyghurs in Modern China,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian History* (2018), <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-160>.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Nabijan Tursun and James Millward, “Political History and Strategies of Control, 1884–1978,” in *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*, ed. Frederick Starr (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 92–93.

<sup>96</sup> Rian Thum, “The Uyghurs in Modern China,” p. 13.

There are many reports of Qur'ans burnt; mosques, mazars, madrasas and Muslim cemeteries shut down and desecrated; non-Han intellectual and religious elders humiliated in parades and struggle meetings; native dress prohibited; long hair on young women cut off in the street.<sup>97</sup>

A surprising number of these examples are conspicuously present in the CCP's approach to Islam and Uyghurs today.

Edmund Waite explains that in response to this period, many Muslims adapted Islamic rituals so that laymen in the household might perform them hidden from the gaze of outsiders, which shifted religious teaching and practice into a less formal household role, subverting state control.<sup>98</sup> Many of these acts of resistance echoed into the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>99</sup> In interviews with UHRP, Uyghur imams in the diaspora recounted that the period following the Cultural Revolution was a time of relative openness, a move to accommodation in the accommodation-repression cycle. However, the state moved back toward repression as Uyghurs attempted to exercise forms of civil resistance throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

We know that Uyghurs employed a number of creative methods to continue passing on religious knowledge to younger generations during the Cultural Revolution, either through private teaching or from sheer memory and often at great personal risk. Researchers have written less about more recent forms of resistance, particularly in the form of private religious transmission.

The period of religious revival that began in the 1980s provides us with an ideal starting point to present the stories of five Uyghur imams who grew up in the latter part of the Cultural Revolution and experienced this revival first hand. The following section presents their stories, which we contextualize using extant scholarship, ultimately illustrating how the state came to adopt the repressive policies we are witnessing today.

**In interviews with UHRP, Uyghur imams in the diaspora recounted that the period following the Cultural Revolution was a time of relative openness [...]**

<sup>97</sup> Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, p. 275.

<sup>98</sup> Stephen Hess, "Islam, Local Elites, and China's Missteps in Integrating the Uyghur Nation," *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies*, 4:7 (2009), p. 87.

<sup>99</sup> Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*.

## VI. Imams Speak of Openness, Renewed Restrictions

The 1980s offered a period of relative openness for religious practice compared to the horrors of the previous decades, when religious structures were systematically demolished and worshippers and religious figures jailed. In the 1980s, mosques were reopened and repaired, new mosques were built,<sup>100</sup> *mazar* festivals were allowed to take place, and travel to Islamic countries was allowed once again—particularly for the Hajj for older Uyghurs. Even Party members were allowed some flexibility to perform daily prayers and attend Friday mosque.<sup>101</sup> The Qur'an was translated into Uyghur by Muhammad Salih Hajim through a government-sponsored project in 1986,<sup>102</sup> and young Uyghurs traveled as far as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey to receive a religious education not obtainable anywhere in China.<sup>103</sup>

The number of religious students studying in madrasas in the southern East Turkistan city of Yarkand, for example, increased from 150 in 1979 to 722 by the end of the 1980s, and more than half of those students were from elsewhere in the region.<sup>104</sup> In 1990, there were upwards of 938 Qur'anic schools across the region with a total of nearly 10,000 students according to an internal survey.<sup>105</sup> One imam, Mettohti, told UHRP that the religious revival that took place

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<sup>100</sup> Australia, Strategic Policy Institute, "Cultural erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang," September 24, 2020, p. 5, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>.

<sup>101</sup> Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, p. 278.

<sup>102</sup> Muhammad Salih Hajim, though in the good graces of the Chinese government throughout the 1980s was—like many other Uyghur scholars and religious figures once supported by the CCP—detained in 2017 in a "re-education" camp where he died less than two months later.

<sup>103</sup> Though a friendly destination for Uyghurs studying in madrasas in the north of the country in the 1980s, Pakistan capitulated quickly to Chinese demands later in the following decade, forcibly removing Uyghurs on a number of occasions. See World Uyghur Congress, "Seeking a Place to Breathe Freely: Current challenges faced by Uyghur refugees and asylum seekers," June 2017, <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/WUC-Refugee-Report-Updated-June-2017.pdf>.

<sup>104</sup> Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, p. 282.

<sup>105</sup> Rémi Castets, "The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam," *Central Asian Affairs* 2015 (2): 221–45.



in this decade was not difficult to comprehend for the Uyghur population after the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. He said, "Young religious leaders came up and revived—or reminded us of—what we had before. It was easy for us to come back to the origin of who we are."<sup>106</sup>

The Chinese government did not actively support religious practices, but played a more hands-off role, as Abdurahman told UHRP: "Some mosques were returned to the people, and the government allowed open prayer once more, but the Party didn't provide any financial support." This is not to say that religious restrictions did not persist across East Turkistan, but in relative terms, some space opened for religious expression and practices. By the end of the decade, however, renewed Uyghur dissatisfaction with Chinese rule emerged as large student-led demonstrations broke out in 1985, 1988, and 1989. Towards the end of the decade, Uyghur students felt that there was enough space to challenge some CCP policies, albeit cautiously. As Sean Roberts argues:

[I]f these accommodating policies had been sustained, it is likely that Uyghurs would have more readily integrated with Chinese society during the 1990s, especially if the PRC had recognized the XUAR as the Uyghurs' homeland and instituted substantive ethnic autonomy there.<sup>107</sup>

**An examination of around 25,000 professional religious personnel in 1991 resulted in the removal of ten percent from their posts, and the CCP instituted the first regular political examinations for imams.**

## Religious revival tempered

A violent uprising in April 1990 in the town of Baren, motivated by government restrictions on Islam, resulted in the death of several Uyghurs and Chinese security forces. In response, the regional government passed two sets of regulations in September 1990 designed to restrict religious practice to those who "do not threaten the status quo" and mandated that only imams approved and licensed by the authorities were legally allowed to preach.<sup>108</sup> Michael Dillon notes that for those around Baren at the time, "[a]ll imams were required to write a letter to the government pledging

<sup>106</sup> UHRP interview with Mettohti, August 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Sean Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, p. 52.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang—China's Muslim Far Northwest* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 73.

their loyalty,” which would later lead to more public and obligatory displays of fealty to the CCP. The subsequent breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 exacerbated fears of Islam as a potential organizing force and led to reversals of the short-lived accommodationist period.

In the aftermath, Chinese officials specifically targeted Uyghur imams and clerics, broke up unauthorized Quranic schools, and halted the construction of mosques, which had increased markedly in the 1980s. An examination of around 25,000 professional religious personnel in 1991 resulted in the removal of ten percent from their posts,<sup>109</sup> and the CCP instituted the first regular political examinations for imams. Only those judged by the party to be “patriotic and politically sound” could stay on in their posts,<sup>110</sup> and from then on, new candidates were required to be trained at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Texts in Ürümqi for official recognition. To this day, all members of the “faculty” of the institute are government employees, and the institute’s curriculum is determined by the Islamic Association of China.<sup>111</sup>

The restriction of Islamic training to the institute gave the government the power to arrest and sentence “unauthorized” imams teaching outside the bounds of state regulations. Many of these early policies targeting imams initiated a longer process of tightening restrictions on Islam in general. By the logic of the CCP, if you can control influential religious figures in Uyghur society, you can control, end eventually eliminate, practices deemed “abnormal.”<sup>112</sup>

In some ways, these new requirements created a new segment of the population situated precariously between Uyghur worshippers and the authorities. As some scholars point out, in contrast to Uyghurs in positions of power within the state and party

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<sup>109</sup> Lillian Craig Harris, “Xinjiang, Central Asia and the Implications for China’s Policy in the Islamic World,” *China Quarterly*, 133 (1993): 111–29.

<sup>110</sup> Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their own land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 66.

<sup>111</sup> Fuller and Lipman, “Islam in Xinjiang,” p. 333.

<sup>112</sup> Recall that the Chinese Constitution officially sanctions “normal religious practice.” What constitutes “normal” or “abnormal” (legal or illegal) behavior has never been clearly expounded, allowing the CCP to shift their boundaries over time, as evidenced by radical changes in the last five years.

apparatus, "The 'ulema<sup>113</sup> therefore remain as a layer of local or (in a few cases) regional leaders, uneasily positioned between ordinary Uyghurs who retain a personal connection to Islam and the secular establishment."<sup>114</sup> The delicate position that imams increasingly found themselves in led, in some cases, to threats and violence against them. One rather striking, if relatively isolated, reaction at the time was a violent attack against an imam from Kashgar's Id Kah mosque in 1996, supposedly intended to serve as a warning to others "not to 'listen to' (collude with) the Han hegemony."<sup>115</sup> The imam, Mullah Aronghan Haji, was also the Vice-Chairman of the Xinjiang Chinese People's Consultative Committee and a member of the Standing Committee of the state-sponsored Islamic Association of China. A young Uyghur told Joanne Smith Finley after the attack: "That imam's links with the authorities were rather too close."<sup>116</sup>

In 1995, a protest took place in Hotan after two imams from the Baytulla mosque were detained for discussing current events. One of their replacements, Abdul Kayum, was also detained for advocating for women's rights. Two to three months after the incident, 20 people were sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from three to 16 years according to Amnesty International.<sup>117</sup> Abdurahman told UHRP that the reason he was forced to resign was that "he was very influential, especially among the young people . . . there were too many people attending his mosque at that time," and that "at the time they sensed that young people had strong influence [over the people]." In another case a few years later, that government dismissed Kashgari imam Abdulhamid because he "had simply become too popular and that his stress on

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<sup>113</sup> The ulema is the collective name for the body of religious and legal scholars and imams in Islam.

<sup>114</sup> Fuller and Lipman, "Islam in Xinjiang," p. 333.

<sup>115</sup> Dillon, *Xinjiang—China's Muslim Far Northwest*, p. 87.

<sup>116</sup> Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, p. 202.

<sup>117</sup> Amnesty International, "Gross violations of human rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous region [sic]," 1999, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/144000/asa170181999en.pdf>.

religious knowledge and the development of the Uyghur people was seen as subversive.”<sup>118</sup>

Abdurahman also told us that in the mid-1990s, *khatibs* (imams with a high-level role in Islam that entails delivering the sermon during Friday and Eid prayers) were actually replaced by the government relatively frequently, though only some notable cases resulted in protests. At the time, imams remained open about their dissatisfaction at religious restrictions, likely as a result of the relative openness of the previous decade. Abdurahman said that “[w]e were absolutely against the religious restrictions” and “[w]e did express our views, we are not happy with this, that freedom of [religious] education is everyone’s right.”<sup>119</sup>

In response to increased unrest, regional authorities then passed “Document No. 7” in 1996—building on regulations from 1994<sup>120</sup>—which mandated that authorities strengthen leadership and control over religion, including the teachings of imams and the construction of mosques,<sup>121</sup> as well as establishing strict limits on foreign cultural exchanges.

James Millward has noted the seeming contradiction between China’s portrayal of the region versus the policies implemented on the ground: “It is of course ironic that even while promoting Xinjiang as the hub of the Silk Road and of the new Eurasian Land Bridge, the state would restrict foreign contacts and educational exchange for Xinjiang’s youth.”<sup>122</sup> The first “Strike Hard” campaign was also initiated around this time, and while it targeted crime more broadly, the state’s increasing use of “illegal religious practice” rhetoric led to more restrictions on Uyghur clergy as part of the same campaign.

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<sup>118</sup> Edmund Waite, “The impact of the state on Islam amongst the Uyghurs: religious knowledge and authority in the Kashgar Oasis,” *Central Asian Survey* vol. 25, no. 3 (September 2006), pp. 251–65.

<sup>119</sup> UHRP interview with Abdurahman, August 2020.

<sup>120</sup> 中华人民共和国国务院令 [Religious Affairs Regulations], passed July 16, 1994, effective October 10, 1994, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-regulation-on-the-management-of>.

<sup>121</sup> Human Rights Watch, “State Control of Religion: Update #1,” March 1, 1998, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a7d08.html>.

<sup>122</sup> James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, p. 343.

All of the imams we interviewed commented that the mid 1990s represented the first renewed sense of religious restrictions, albeit relatively moderate in implementation when compared to the years before the imams fled in 2015 or 2016. All told UHRP that there was a noticeable change from the government that designated them—and by extension their entire families—as “suspicious.” Abduqeyyum told us, “Since 1995 our entire family has lived in fear since we were designated as ‘suspicious.’ There are constant house searches for illegal books” and that authorities became “obsessed with what’s happening inside people’s houses.” The impact for these figures and their families was immediate, down to their outward appearance in public, as Abduqeyyum explained that “[w]hen you’re classified as suspicious, you have to even look happy. If you look angry or mad, they will arrest you.”

In 1995 authorities formally approved Abduqeyyum to serve as a khatib when he was just 17 years old. He said of the treatment after taking up the role:

When I became a khatib I became an even more targeted person. Whatever I do, wherever I go: I am on the authorities’ “suspicious” list. Even during Eid: where did I go? Who did I meet with? Who did I talk to? I was always, always under surveillance.<sup>123</sup>

Mettohti, who grew up in a religious family in Ghulja, recounted his experience of harassment by suspicious government officials. Because the government was in the midst of suppressing Uyghur *meshrep* at the time, even organized sports were seen as suspicious activity.<sup>124</sup> Mettohti told us that the situation escalated to the point where members of the Uyghur community around Ghulja

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<sup>123</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, August 2020.

<sup>124</sup> Several scholars have explored how *meshrep*, a wide-ranging form of community gathering that often serves simultaneously as a platform for entertainment, piety, and morality, has been an object of Chinese state control and intervention since the late 1990s. See chapter 11 of Jay Dautcher, *Down a Narrow Road* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008); Rachel Harris, “A Weekly *Mäshrāp* to Tackle Extremism”: Music-Making in Uyghur Communities and Intangible Cultural Heritage in China,” *Ethnomusicology* 64 (1): 25–55 (2020); and Sean Roberts, “Negotiating locality, Islam, and national culture in a changing borderlands: The revival of the *Mäshrāp* ritual among young Uyghur men in the Ili valley,” *Central Asian Survey* 17 (4): 673–99 (1998).



responded by holding a protest in August 1996 against the policies, holding up a banner asking “Is playing football a crime?”<sup>125</sup>

These policies were also augmented by pre-emptive moves by the government to ensure that even the religious development of children within these households was monitored closely. Abduqeyyum told UHRP that Chinese authorities identified him early in his life as a potential religious leader, given his family background. They sought to intervene early on to ensure they would have control over his development, including what he was taught and ultimately what he would teach. He explained that:

Since my father was known to be a religious person, [Chinese authorities] came and talked to him first. They told him that since he is getting old now, he may want for his son to be the kind of “inheritor” of the family’s religious knowledge. They asked if my father had ever taught me about religion. When my father admitted to teaching just some very basics about religion, they expressed concern, restated that our family was “suspicious” and recommended that I be sent to a special Chinese-state religious school and not learn at home.<sup>126</sup>

His story indicates that although the government was tightening restrictions until the mid-1990s, it still wished to co-opt religious teaching to its benefit rather than to stamp it out altogether.

Many Uyghur religious figures at the time simply chose to operate outside this newly constructed state-controlled system from the beginning, opting not to play the role of intermediary between the government and the people. This led to a rise in underground religious teaching by imams and religious leaders not approved by the government. In the 1980s, it was typical for young religious students to visit the local imam’s home for lessons, but this reversed by the mid-1990s, when imams themselves began to visit the homes of students to avoid detection. This choice, however, carried significant risk of detention for “illegal preaching” or state

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<sup>125</sup> UHRP interview with Mettohti, August 2020.

<sup>126</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, August 2020.

subversion, given that religious teaching outside the mosque was now illegal.

Restrictions escalated further through the 1990s. After protests were violently suppressed in Ghulja in 1997 following the arrest of two Uyghur religious students, the regional government enacted the “October 1998 Instructions,” which ordered local authorities to establish a political verification dossier to ensure imams meet political requirements, and established an annual revision system of accreditations for imams, which required imams to attend “patriotic education” courses.<sup>127</sup>

A new set of regulations in the 2000s signaled that the authorities were taking another step forward in restricting the space for Uyghur clergy to exercise any sort of autonomy. In addition to supposed protections for religious practice, which continued to dwindle, the regulations set out the responsibilities of Uyghur religious teachers, which included accepting direct government supervision.<sup>128</sup> The regional government also passed amendments to the 1994 regulations, which narrowed the right of registered religious organizations to sponsor seminaries, schools, or scripture classes, and “emphasize[d] that no one at all may teach ‘scripture students’ without prior approval.”<sup>129</sup>

**On the back of these new regulations, in the early 2000s the state employed new strategies that would have an even greater impact—namely the introduction of region-wide mandatory courses for Uyghur clergy.**

### **Mandatory courses for imams**

On the back of these new regulations, in the early 2000s the state employed new strategies that would have an even greater impact—namely the introduction of region-wide mandatory courses for Uyghur clergy. The requirement built on a patchwork of courses introduced at a local level in the early 1990s through the United Front Work Department to provide training on China's legal system for local religious leaders to “clarify the CCP's policy on religious belief and the distinction between legal and illegal religious activities.”<sup>130</sup> Some imams fled the country as a result of the initial

<sup>127</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang,” 2005, p. 32, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/china0405.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Devastating Blows*, p. 33.

<sup>129</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Devastating Blows*, p. 36.

<sup>130</sup> Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang—China's Muslim Far Northwest*, p. 90.

trainings, given that failure to comply with the government and take the courses resulted in house arrest or prison sentences.<sup>131</sup>

The attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 represented a major turning point in the Chinese government's approach to Uyghurs. Authorities began stressing the need to respond to threats that they claimed were connected to international terrorism, despite officials stating even in the days prior to 9/11 that "by no means is Xinjiang a place where violence and terrorist accidents take place very often."<sup>132</sup> The Chinese government went on to publish a number of reports alleging that unrest in East Turkistan was connected with international terrorist networks abroad, despite a lack of any substantive evidence.<sup>133</sup>

Around the same time, the regional government introduced more formalized courses for Uyghur clergy meant to ensure that Islamic teachings were in line with the CCP. Imams from across the region were notified and brought to Ürümqi for "re-education" courses lasting 20 days, and sometimes for longer periods. Abdurahman remarked: "They told us to remove anything that doesn't comply with socialism," and that the classes were about "how to change our teachings, how to change our religion, so that everything supports Chinese socialism."<sup>134</sup>

Human Rights Watch noted the Chinese government characterized the campaign as the "largest-scale religious training" since the founding of the country with 8,000 imams above the village level undergoing "political re-education" between March 15 and December 23, 2001. The sessions were meant to re-establish "correct ideological understanding" and improve the qualities of religious leaders. By 2002, the government announced that another 8,000 "patriotic religious personalities" would be trained in Ürümqi—6,000 at the local level and the rest in Ürümqi. The courses involved speeches from Party members and government officials, and written and oral tests on the new regulations. The courses were also notable

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<sup>131</sup> Spiessens, "Diasporic Lives of Uyghur *Mollas*," p. 283.

<sup>132</sup> Bao Lisheng, "Chinese Officials Say Not Much Terrorism in Xinjiang," *Ta Kung Pao*, September 2, 2001.

<sup>133</sup> For additional information on the Chinese government's statements and claims following 9/11, see Human Rights Watch, "Devastating Blows," pp. 16–25.

<sup>134</sup> UHRP interview with Abdurahman, August 2020.

in that the attitude of each trainee was monitored by instructors, and final evaluations were kept on file, information that would be used against many of them in the years to come.<sup>135</sup>

Several imams told UHRP that although the courses were clearly coercive, most of the participants simply paid lip service to the teachings and returned to their hometowns without a change in attitude or approach. Abdurahman, speaking about many of the course attendees, said:

They didn't comply. They didn't obey the government training at all because they knew that if they stood against it, they would get arrested. Everybody knew that. They would listen during the trainings, but they did what they had to do.<sup>136</sup>

Abdurahman's claim is supported by reporting from Human Rights Watch, which found that "[e]ach session is a cat-and-mouse game, where the safest way to be left off the hook is to admit to relatively minor mistakes, if need be by inventing them."<sup>137</sup>

Other former imams told us they knew the government was simply trying to use them as a means of indoctrinating the local population. Abduqeyyum told us, "The authorities wanted me to become an imam so that they could use me for the government's benefit." He also recounted the effects of the policies on his religious consciousness, saying, "There were loads of lines I had to memorize. But I knew that if I recited them, I would no longer be a religious person. I would be almost an atheist. I wasn't comfortable reciting the government rhetoric at all."<sup>138</sup>

Aside from short courses for imams already in positions at local mosques, longer courses were offered to younger Uyghurs, though strictly controlled by the state. In 2012, UHRP interviewed a former imam of a mosque near Kumul who underwent training at a local Islamic institute from October 1998 to October 2001 with 30 other students. There were three conditions for entry into the institute: that the candidate 1) was a graduate from high school, 2) did not

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<sup>135</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Devastating Blows," p. 49.

<sup>136</sup> UHRP interview with Abdurahman, August 2020.

<sup>137</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Devastating Blows," p. 52.

<sup>138</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, August 2020.

have a record of anti-government views, and 3) had a “clean” family history regarding political activity. The former imam described how they spent half of the day learning about the compatibility of Islam with socialist principles, and harmonizing religious preaching with government policy. The former imam also told UHRP that students at the institute were keen to learn about Islam, and in order to do so they paid lip service to the political study instructors.<sup>139</sup> According to the interviewee, Qur’anic education lasted just one of the three years they spent in training, and the books they used were published by the government.

Thousands of already-approved Uyghur clergy were also forced through courses over a period of several years, but the impact on the imams upon their return to local mosques across the region was anything but clear. Top-down regulations on religious behavior and practices targeting the transmission of religious knowledge continued through the 2000s as the national government amended the Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) and stepped up controls over mosques.<sup>140</sup>

Beginning in 2008, the regional government also enacted measures to restrict and control the activities of *büwi*. Though the policies varied from prefecture to prefecture, many new measures included formal training focused on the CCP’s policy towards religion, as well as on efforts to force *büwi* to sign a pledge to “uphold stability,” including refraining from wearing veils or long dresses and teaching religious texts to students.<sup>141</sup> In her research on *büwi*, Rachel Harris found that space for religious practices hitherto unsanctioned by the regional government began to close through the 2010s.<sup>142</sup> The authorities began requiring permits for many *büwi*

**Not only did they require imams to recite these prewritten sermons, they also required them to announce regulations on illegal religious activities during Friday prayers after meeting with local officials each week, with strict penalties for non-compliance.**

<sup>139</sup> Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Sacred Right Defiled: China’s iron fisted repression of Uyghur religious freedom,” April 30, 2013, <https://docs.uhrp.org/Sacred-Right-Defiled-Chinas-Iron-Fisted-Repression-of-Uyghur-Religious-Freedom.pdf>.

<sup>140</sup> 中华人民共和国国务院令 [Religious Affairs Regulations], passed November 30, 2004, effective March 5, 2005, [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2005/content\\_63293.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2005/content_63293.htm).

<sup>141</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, “Xinjiang Authorities Train, Seek to Regulate Muslim Women Religious Figures,” August 20, 2009, <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/index.phpd>.

<sup>142</sup> Harris, Rachel. “Harmonizing Islam in Xinjiang: Sound and meaning in rural Uyghur religious practice,” in *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in Socialist China*, edited by Ildikó Bellér-Hann and Trine Brox (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013), p. 302.



and increasingly regulated the transmission of religious knowledge to children.

## Pre-written sermons

The authorities also targeted religious sermons around the 2010s, forcing Uyghur clergy to serve as the mouthpiece of the Party, which UHRP has documented in previous reports.<sup>143</sup> The Friday sermon remained one of the most clear and public manifestations of Uyghur religious teaching, so it was no wonder the government latched onto it as a means of control. One former imam told UHRP in 2012:

In my sermons, I had to explain national law, local law, party rules and religious law to the people who came to the mosque to worship. Sometimes they asked questions about what was permissible and I didn't always know how to answer. When I did discuss religion in my sermons, it had to be kept short. If any of the people in the mosque asked detailed questions about religious doctrine, a party observer would stop the questioner.<sup>144</sup>

In 2008, the Islamic Association of China even established a corps of liaisons within each province to deal with matters involving the interpretation of religious texts. By 2010, sermons were nearly entirely written by the IAC's Islamic Affairs Steering Committee. Up until at least 2013, the IAC also published its own sermons,<sup>145</sup> and they made the confirmation of new imams conditional on one's familiarity with these pre-written texts.<sup>146</sup> Not only did they require imams to recite these prewritten sermons, they also required them to announce regulations on illegal religious activities during Friday prayers after meeting with local officials each week, with strict penalties for non-compliance.<sup>147</sup> Abdurahman told us that "[i]f we

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<sup>143</sup> UHRP, "Sacred Right Defiled: China's iron fist repression of Uyghur religious freedom," pp. 31–32.

<sup>144</sup> UHRP, "Sacred Right Defiled," p. 32.

<sup>145</sup> State Administration for Religious Affairs of P.R.C., "国家宗教事务局 2013 年工作要点" [State Administration for Religious Affairs 2013 Points], January 18, 2013, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/xwzx/xwj/18853.htm>.

<sup>146</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "CECC Annual Report 2007," October 10, 2007, <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/annualRpt/annualRpt07/CECCannRpt2007.pdf>.

<sup>147</sup> UHRP, "Sacred Right Defiled," p. 33.

add one extra word to the approved speech, we would be imprisoned.”<sup>148</sup>

Such control over imams, while more or less consistent since 2000, was especially acute following the uprising in Ürümchi in July 2009. As we have seen, repression followed protests in Baren in 1990, local disputes in Hotan in 1995, and the large-scale protests in Ghulja in 1997. The same took place after the unrest in Ürümchi in July 2009, when Nur Bekri, then Chairman of the region, increased calls to strengthen management of religion and “[bring] into full play the special role of patriotic religious figures in maintaining ethnic unity.”<sup>149</sup> The regional government was stating more openly their intention to instrumentalize Uyghur clergy for the ostensible promotion of stability.

## Resistance

Uyghurs consistently found ways to hold onto Islam as an element of their identity during this period, often in spite of the hardening government line. At the same time, as Joanne Smith Finley points out, “Uyghurs found themselves increasingly confronted with a bipolar world in which they could resist and face marginalisation, or accommodate to ensure survival.”<sup>150</sup> This sentiment might also describe the position in which Uyghur religious leaders found themselves, as well. Uyghur clergy often bore the brunt of government decisions, given their stature and exposure in society, from the days of the Republican period through the Cultural Revolution and into today. Uyghur clergy embody a certain continuity with a past the state has deployed its raw power to co-opt, exploit, and eradicate.

While some Uyghurs chose to keep their heads down and follow the state rules regulating religious practice, others took the opposite approach, seeking out private, underground classes as a

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<sup>148</sup> UHRP interview with Abdurahman, August 2020.

<sup>149</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, “Annual Report 2007,” October 10, 2007, <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/annualRpt/annualRpt07/CECCannRpt2007.pdf>.

<sup>150</sup> Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, p. 413.

means of resistance. Joanne Smith Finley recounts such resistance in an interview with a Uyghur high-school student in 2004, who said:

[He] scorned the government's attempts to limit religious activity in Xinjiang, and proclaimed its efforts doomed to failure . . . [and] confirmed the renewed centrality of the mosque in Uyghur public life and firmly rejected the notion that the state could control Islam: "The mosques are a public place, right? They can't get rid of them [...] They may try to control religion, but they can't, not even with their [state-trained] imams ... at the end of the day, the imams are still Uyghurs."<sup>151</sup>

Interviews and reporting on the ground indicate that many of the CCP's policies targeting religion were backfiring in some quarters. Several of the imams we spoke to echoed this point, especially the feeling that the further the CCP went in restricting religion, the more tightly they held onto those beliefs. One imam even went so far to say that "people realized that the only thing that can save us is religion."<sup>152</sup>

Strong reactions to state pressure also changed the ways in which Islam was taught and practiced. Several of the imams we spoke with mentioned the ways that they altered their practices to evade censorship or punishment. Before Chinese authorities began to write sermons to be read word-for-word, one imam told us that he began to use coded language during his sermons to continue to speak directly to his congregation. While authorities interrogated worshippers to ensure sermons were in line with government rhetoric, he felt that he held an implicit understanding with his congregation, who understood the intention behind his words. He told us that:

There is a bond between the congregation and the imam in order to practice our religion [under these conditions]. I used skillful language, almost in a hidden way so that my preaching didn't stand openly against the government but,

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<sup>151</sup> Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, p. 262.

<sup>152</sup> UHRP interview with Muhammad, November 2020.

at the same time, could be understood by my congregation.<sup>153</sup>

The same imam said he would tell his congregation during the sermon that “education” is very important, and that “we should educate our kids very well both at home and everywhere . . . and that we should give them a good education, an honest education, a correct education.” He told us that his congregants knew that what he meant in reality was that they should continue to prioritize religious education for their children.

Other venues like the *nikah* (marriage) ceremony provided space for unofficial imams to preach. As Rachel Harris and Rahile Dawut observe, “By the mid-2000s, the imam’s sermon at the *nikah* had become an important site for the dissemination of new religious ideas among Uyghur society.” The authors note that this took place largely in southern towns where “large groups of young men would crowd into the wedding venue to listen to often lengthy sermons on the importance of daily prayer and a pious lifestyle.”<sup>154</sup> The Chinese government caught on and quickly halted this practice. In our dataset, we found that at least several imams have been detained for either officiating weddings or for “illegal preaching” at ceremonies around this time.

Other studies have also attempted to understand the changing dynamics of Islam among Uyghurs, as Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa argue that following restrictions in the aftermath of 9/11, social media provided a renewed private space for religious teaching and expression.<sup>155</sup> In another study of the effects of state policies on self-representation of Uyghur migrants in the outskirts of Ürümqi, Darren Byler notes the dueling effects of state policy and expanding access to communications technology:

This push toward new forms of Islam was thus simultaneously an effect of state oppression and facilitated by state development of new communication networks.

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<sup>153</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, November 2020.

<sup>154</sup> Rachel Harris and Rahile Dawut, “Listening in on Uyghur Wedding Videos: Piety, Tradition and Self-fashioning” in *Ethnographies of Islam in China*, eds. Harris, Ha and Jaschok (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), p. 141.

<sup>155</sup> Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa, “Islam by smartphone: reading the Uyghur Islamic revival on WeChat,” *Central Asian Survey* 39 no. 1 (2019), pp. 61–80.

Smart phones, 3G networks, Mp3 recordings carried on SD cards, and the New Silk Road highways were all part of what fostered the religious revival among Uyghur migrants. The precariousness of social life in the midst of a settler-colonial project thus structured and enabled the way they understand, negotiated and deployed Islamic moral frameworks.<sup>156</sup>

Byler also notes that, given the tight censorship of the “Friday” mosques, many Uyghurs would meet outside the mosque itself to discuss Islamic teachings and pray, and that “most piety teachings were shared in the periphery around the mosque rather than in the mosque itself.”<sup>157</sup>

By the late 2000s and into the 2010s, many of these restrictions were substantially suppressing public and private religious teaching. And yet, a strain of resistance still lingered across the population. Imams we spoke with told us while restrictions only intensified after July 2009, they continued to try to teach religious students in more covert ways, either in private homes, cars, or elsewhere. For several of the imams, though, their teaching changed drastically after 2013, when restrictions and control became unbearable, partially due to intensified surveillance and monitoring. Mettursun told us that:

After 2010, and especially after 2013, it became impossible to teach religion. Before we would go to friends’ homes or even teach in cars, choosing a different place each time. But then cameras appeared everywhere. At one point the authorities called me and said they are watching every step I made 24 hours a day with a ‘special’ camera they have for me.<sup>158</sup>

The same was observed by a former imam from Kumul, interviewed by UHRP in 2012, who taught eight to ten children individually in their homes without the state’s permission during his tenure as a

**For several of the imams, though, their teaching changed drastically after 2013, when restrictions and control became unbearable, partially due to intensified surveillance and monitoring.**

<sup>156</sup> Darren Byler, “Spirit Breaking: Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City,” PhD diss., University of Washington, 2018, p. 243.

<sup>157</sup> Byler, “Spirit Breaking,” p. 266.

<sup>158</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, November 2020.



local imam from 2003 to 2008.<sup>159</sup> Another Uyghur man told UHRP researchers in the same year that private religious classes for Uyghur children had all but disappeared in Kashgar because of the pervasive nature of state surveillance in the preceding years.<sup>160</sup>

All of the imams we interviewed reported feeling powerlessness and anxiety, in part due to constant surveillance. Abdurahman said, “By 2010, I was not able to deliver what an imam should be doing in his role. We had to do completely what the authorities had written for us in the mosques. . . . There was simply no role for the imam anymore.”<sup>161</sup> Mettohti recalled a particularly humiliating experience in Hotan city in 2014, in which he and several hundred other imams were forced to wear athletic clothing and dance in a public square. A similar forced dance performance reportedly took place in Kashgar (as well as other locales) in 2015, suggesting that it may have been widespread.<sup>162</sup>

Abduqeyyum was detained briefly in 2012 and then released but relieved of his official status shortly thereafter. He told us: “After I was removed from my position, restrictions were re-imposed. I was not allowed to even ride in a car, not even a public bus. Whatever I did during my career as an imam was constantly re-examined and re-scrutinised.”<sup>163</sup> It was at this point that he also decided to flee the region, noting that anyone even tangentially affiliated with him has since been detained, while at least three former business associates and family members are now dead:

Even my employer who would drive me to work sites was later arrested. I did not know him personally and he did not really know me either—he only drove me. But because I had left the country, he too was sent to jail . . . Anyone with connection with me ended up detained.<sup>164</sup>

**Mettohti recalled a particularly humiliating experience in Hotan city in 2014, in which he and several hundred other imams were forced to wear athletic clothing and dance in a public square.**

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<sup>159</sup> UHRP, “Sacred Right Defiled,” p. 43.

<sup>160</sup> UHRP, “Sacred Right Defiled,” p. 42.

<sup>161</sup> UHRP interview with Mettohti, November 2020.

<sup>162</sup> Express Tribune, “Suppressing religious freedoms”; Sounding Islam in China, “Imams dancing to ‘Little Apple’ in Uch Turpan, Xinjiang.”

<sup>163</sup> We discuss the theme of scrutiny of past behavior as a justification for detention in more detail in Section III.

<sup>164</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, November 2020.

Evidence for such a system—one in which relatives and friends of those alleged to have crossed a line are also deemed “suspicious”—was illustrated at a local level through the leaked Qaraqash Document in early 2019.<sup>165</sup> The document provides detailed information about the familial, social, and religious circles of detainees throughout Qaraqash county, likely as a means of keeping track of Uyghurs with similar tendencies.

This sense of helplessness hardened as several of the imams we spoke with told us they increasingly felt their lives were under threat. Similarly, in 2016 Elke Spiessens interviewed several Uyghur imams who fled China, observing:

The decision taken by Uyghur clergy and students to leave China was mostly driven by necessity, despair, and frustration. . . . More often than not they did not have specific destinations in mind; they just wanted to “get out.”<sup>166</sup>

Mettursun described his decision to flee in similar terms, noting that even his 100-year-old grandfather, a former imam, was under heavy state surveillance given his role as an influential religious leader. He also cited the role of unabating assimilation, telling us that “We were given a choice: either you become Chinese or you become erased.”<sup>167</sup>

The policies also began to more closely attach the label of “extremism” to formerly quotidian expressions of faith, which often disproportionately affected religious figures.

## Xi Jinping and the second-generation nationalities policies

Since Xi Jinping was elected as General Secretary of the Communist Party in 2012, the authority of the state has been substantially eroded in favor of the Party, exemplified in the motto “the Party leads everything” (党是领导一切的).<sup>168</sup> Xi’s approach, partly informed by scholars such as Hu Lianhe promoting the so-called “second-generation nationalities policies,” has led the CCP to largely abandon policies that provided some very limited space for ethnic

<sup>165</sup> UHRP, “Ideological Transformation.”

<sup>166</sup> Spiessens, “Diasporic Lives of Uyghur *Mollas*,” p. 284.

<sup>167</sup> UHRP interview with Mettursun, November 2020.

<sup>168</sup> Nils Grünberg and Katja Drinhausen, “The Party leads on everything: China’s changing governance in Xi Jinping’s new era,” 2019, <https://merics.org/en/report/party-leads-everything>.

autonomy.<sup>169</sup> Frustrated at Uyghur resistance to integration efforts, these officials advocated for much tougher policy implementation. As described by James Leibold, “What unites these policies is their focus on removing ‘minority privileges’ as a way to ensure integration, promote nationalism, and create a more homogeneous society.”<sup>170</sup>

As a result, the government began to shift away from prioritizing development of periphery regions to stifling dissent. As Freedom House notes, “Under Xi, it has become obvious that the top priority for the region is ‘maintaining stability,’ meaning even economic development is of secondary importance.”<sup>171</sup> The immediate impact on Uyghurs was an explosion of “stability maintenance” policies, which often invoked greater control over religion and religious expression. The policies also began to more closely attach the label of “extremism” to formerly quotidian expressions of faith, which often disproportionately affected religious figures.

In May 2014, the Chinese government initiated what it called the “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism” campaign in East Turkistan, involving a significant increase in surveillance and control of Uyghurs. Although digital surveillance has also escalated dramatically during this period, time-tested forms of relational surveillance continued to penetrate further into Uyghur lives as a result of the campaign, blurring the already murky boundary between public and private life. Abduqeyyum told us these kinds of incursions into his private life and that of his family led to him burying many of his religious books in a cemetery behind his house for fear that authorities might one day find them during a raid. He

**The data we collected for this report show a number of cases in which the authorities detained religious figures explicitly for either traveling abroad or communicating with family abroad, particularly to and from 26 countries deemed as “sensitive.”**

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<sup>169</sup> James Leibold, “Planting the Seed: Ethnic Policy in Xi Jinping’s New Era of Cultural Nationalism,” *China Brief*, December 31, 2019, [jamestown.org/program/planting-the-seed-ethnic-policy-in-xi-jinpings-new-era-of-cultural-nationalism](https://jamestown.org/program/planting-the-seed-ethnic-policy-in-xi-jinpings-new-era-of-cultural-nationalism).

<sup>170</sup> James Leibold, “China’s second-generation ethnic policies are already here,” *Made in China Journal*, September 7, 2020, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/09/07/chinas-second-generation-ethnic-policies-are-already-here/>.

<sup>171</sup> Sarah Cook, “The battle for China’s spirit: Religious revival, repression, and resistance under Xi Jinping,” *Freedom House*, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2017/battle-chinas-spirit>.

went so far as to throw several religious texts into a nearby river in order to avoid detection by police.<sup>172</sup>

Community surveillance, such as reporting “suspicious” actions of friends, family, and neighbors became standard, and was accompanied by another form of in-person intelligence work. In December 2017, Human Rights Watch described how “Xinjiang authorities mobilized more than a million cadres to spend a week living in homes primarily in the countryside” through the “Becoming Family” policy.<sup>173</sup> During these “visits,” cadres gather information on political loyalties, as well as the smallest details of everyday life disclosing an external affinity, such as belief in Islam.<sup>174</sup> Such surveillance created an atmosphere of mutual distrust between individuals and led to the disintegration of communal networks. A former camp detainee, for example, told Human Rights Watch: “There was an imam of a mosque, who said a prayer for someone when that person came to a mosque requesting it, and someone else informed on the imam and he was detained.”<sup>175</sup> A later build-up of tech-enabled surveillance bolstered this approach by simply mounting cameras equipped with facial recognition software at the doors of mosques to monitor attendance.<sup>176</sup>

The regional government also strengthened border controls beginning in 2015 by encouraging passport applications before confiscating the same documents for “safe-keeping” just a year later.<sup>177</sup> The passport regulations offered local officials records of

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<sup>172</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, August 2020.

<sup>173</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China: Visiting Officials Occupy Homes in Muslim Region,” May 13, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/13/china-visiting-officials-occupy-homes-muslim-region>.

<sup>174</sup> Darren Byler, “China’s Government Has Ordered a Million Citizens to Occupy Uighur Homes. Here’s What They Think They’re Doing,” *China File*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/postcard/million-citizens-occupy-ughur-homes-xinjiang>.

<sup>175</sup> Human Rights Watch, “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims,” September 2018, p. 23, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>.

<sup>176</sup> Pierre Hamdi, “Videos show how China has installed facial recognition scanners in Uighur mosques,” *France 24*, September 13, 2019, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20190913-videos-show-how-china-has-installed-facial-recognition-scanners-ughur-mosques>.

<sup>177</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China: Passports Arbitrarily Recalled in Xinjiang,” November 21, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/21/china-passports-arbitrarily-recalled-xinjiang>.

those who had travelled or *intended* to travel overseas in the intervening years; many of these people were later detained in camps for this very reason. The data we collected for this report show a number of cases in which the authorities detained religious figures explicitly for either traveling abroad or communicating with family abroad, particularly to and from 26 countries deemed as “sensitive.”<sup>178</sup> The Qaraqash Document also confirmed that Uyghurs had been detained simply for applying for a passport and not leaving the country.<sup>179</sup>

A further shift took place in 2016 with the appointment of hardliner Chen Guanguo as Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region that August. Chen rose to prominence working under Premier Li Keqiang in his role as Party Secretary of Tibet, where he oversaw the construction of a dense network of surveillance infrastructure. Chen’s approach in Tibet directly informed his policies in East Turkistan.<sup>180</sup> Spending on internal security in the region, including surveillance, security personnel and the construction of camps reached \$8.4 billion in 2017 — six times as much as in 2012.<sup>181</sup> According to leaked documents, Chen argued during a video conference in August 2017 that “vocational skills, education training and transformation centers” would be examples of good practices for achieving Xi Jinping’s goals for the region. He later told regional officials in October 2017: “The struggle against terror and to safeguard stability is a protracted war, and also a war of offense.”<sup>182</sup>

Chen was not only forging a new path in line with the new ethnic policies, he was also riding a wave of regulations that had

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<sup>178</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Eradicating Ideological Viruses,” p. 15.

<sup>179</sup> UHRP, “‘Ideological Transformation’: Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan.”

<sup>180</sup> Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, “Chen Quanguo: The Strongman Behind Beijing’s Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang,” *China Brief* 17, no. 12 (2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/>.

<sup>181</sup> Chris Buckley and Paul Mozur, “How China Uses High-Tech Surveillance to Subdue Minorities,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/world/asia/china-surveillance-xinjiang.html>.

<sup>182</sup> Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims,” November 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

already been in development prior to his arrival. James Millward notes:

While the record of new laws and regulations since 2014 or earlier suggests that Chen's arrival . . . was not the sole catalyst for the heightened repression that began in 2017, he presided over its material implementation against the intensified legal and regulatory backdrop.<sup>183</sup>

The legal and regulatory backdrop Millward referred to includes the Counter-Terror Law in 2015, followed by "Regional Implementation Measures" in 2017.<sup>184</sup> In addition to conflating basic religious expression with extremism and terrorism,<sup>185</sup> both laws claim "[e]xtremism is the ideological foundation of terrorism," and that the government should "[r]esolutely oppose all forms of using distorted religious teachings or other means to incite hatred or discrimination, and advocate violence and other extremism." Vague definitions of "extremism," "terrorism," and "distorted religious teachings" provided police broad authority to arrest Uyghur religious figures in particular. These laws were then followed by the Regulations on De-extremification in March, 2017, which prohibited an extensive range of activity related to ethnic, religious, and political expression.<sup>186</sup> The regulations directly target imams in Article 48, which states:

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<sup>183</sup> James Millward and Dahila Peterson, "China's system of oppression in Xinjiang: how it developed and how to curb it," *Brookings Institute*, September 2020, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FP\\_20200914\\_china\\_oppression\\_xinjiang\\_millward\\_peterson.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FP_20200914_china_oppression_xinjiang_millward_peterson.pdf)

<sup>184</sup> "Measures of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region for Implementing the Counterterrorism Law of the People's Republic of China," adopted at the 12<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee of Xinjiang Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, effective since August 1, 2016. Translation by China Law Translate available at <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/xinjiang-implementing-measures-for-the-p-r-c-counter-terrorism-law/>.

<sup>185</sup> See the Joint Other Letter sent by ten UN Special Rapporteurs and two UN Working Groups to China on November 1, 2019, stating that "Article 7 of the Counter-Terrorism Law and the Implementing Measures indicates that "[e]xtremism is the ideological foundation of terrorism, preventing and punishing extremist activities is an important strategy for countering the roots of terrorism." This formulation may conflate 'terrorism' with 'extremism' linked to religious belief and practice, giving scope for the penalization of peaceful expression of Tibetan or Uyghur identity or manifestation of a religious identity, acts of non-violent dissent, or criticism of ethnic or religious policies, contrary to articles 2, 18 and 19 of the UDHR," [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/SR/OL\\_CHN\\_18\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/SR/OL_CHN_18_2019.pdf).

<sup>186</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Eradicating Ideological Viruses," p. 23.



Religious professionals shall publicize mutual tolerance, harmonious relations, a philosophy of unity and amicability to followers; and have doctrines of patriotism, peace, unity, moderation, tolerance, good deeds, and so forth run through their religious teaching and explanations; unequivocally rejecting extremification and guiding the followers to build correct faith and positioning, and to resist permeation of extremification.<sup>187</sup>

The regional government also published a list of “75 behavioral indicators of religious extremism” in December 2014, which included some limited examples of violent behavior, but many other ordinary activities with no relation to violence at all. These included people who “store large amounts of food in their homes,” “those who smoke and drink but quit doing so suddenly,” or “those who buy or store equipment such as dumbbells . . . boxing gloves, as well as maps, compasses, telescopes, ropes, and tents without obvious reasons.”<sup>188</sup>

At the same time, and taking a broader approach to religion, Xi Jinping expressed his intention that the CCP overhaul the management of religious affairs and “Sinicize” all religions in China. At the Central United Front Work Conference in May 2015, Xi said, “To actively guide religion to adapt to the socialist society, we must adhere to the direction of Sinicization,” which he repeated at the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016.<sup>189</sup> This directive eventually led to a further revision to regulations governing religions affairs in September 2017, which expressly prohibited religious teaching in regular schools, narrowed the scope of religious practice to state-approved venues, and effectively criminalized religious practice elsewhere. The amendments also

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<sup>187</sup> 新疆维吾尔自治区去极端化条例 [XUAR Regulations on De-Extremification], passed March 29, 2017, effective April 1, 2017, [www.xjpcsc.gov.cn/article/225/lfgz.html](http://www.xjpcsc.gov.cn/article/225/lfgz.html).

<sup>188</sup> Nanchang Public Security Bureau, “75 behavioral indicators of religious extremism,” September 8, 2015, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-12-24/093231321497.shtml>.

<sup>189</sup> Communist Party Member Network, “坚持我国宗教中国化方向” [Adhere to the direction of sinicization of religion in our country], undated, <http://www.12371.cn/2019/07/17/ART11563356798241707.shtml>.

clearly stipulated that those without express approval from the authorities “must not engage in [religious] activity.”<sup>190</sup>

For Uyghurs in particular, the amendments led to more direct interventions by CCP authorities into the lives of imams and their congregations. The “four-enter” policy, for example, stipulated that every mosque must feature a Chinese flag, information regarding China’s laws on religion, materials promoting “core socialist values” of China, and documents on the country’s “outstanding traditional culture.”<sup>191</sup>

Some of these considerable changes in approach to the Uyghur (and broader Turkic) population reflected, once again, an even sharper turn from accommodation to unrelenting repression rivaling the Cultural Revolution. These changes became most apparent with the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in the name of “re-education” beginning in 2016.<sup>192</sup> Earlier detentions on a smaller scale can be traced to 2014 when regional authorities began implementing policies to combat alleged cases or indicators of “extremism” within the population. One particular target of the campaign was those influenced by “religious extremist thought,”<sup>193</sup> which is supported by further evidence from the dataset, discussed in Section III (pp. 12–31). These mass detentions represented the material implementation of the ideological side of the government’s securitization strategy, paralleling the massive buildup of a high-tech police force.

Arbitrary detention in this burgeoning camp system, although often seemingly capricious, targeted certain segments of the population. The Qaraqash Document, a leaked government

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<sup>190</sup> “中华人民共和国国务院令” [Religious Affairs Regulations], Article 36 (3), passed November 30, 2004, amended June 14, 2017, effective February 1, 2018, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content\\_5223282.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm).

<sup>191</sup> The Economist, “China’s repression of Islam is spreading beyond Xinjiang,” September 28, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/china/2019/09/26/chinas-repression-of-islam-is-spreading-beyond-xinjiang>.

<sup>192</sup> UHRP, “The Mass Internment of Uyghurs: “We want to be respected as humans. Is it too much to ask?”” August 2018, [https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/MassDetention\\_of\\_Uyghurs.pdf](https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/MassDetention_of_Uyghurs.pdf). See also Human Rights Watch, “Eradicating Ideological Viruses.”

<sup>193</sup> Chen Fang, (2015). “独家重磅：新疆去极端化调查” [Scoop: Investigation into Xinjiang deradicalization], *iFeng News*, 2015, accessed December 19, 2020, <http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/xjqjdh/>.

spreadsheet which provides a snapshot of camp detentions, indicates that the most frequent grounds for detention include birth policy violations, “unsafe post ‘80s, ‘90s or ‘00s persons,”<sup>194</sup> travel abroad, and notably, reasons relating to religious practice.<sup>195</sup> The Aksu List, another leaked document analyzed by Human Rights Watch, which included information on 2,000 detainees from Aksu prefecture from late 2018, supports these findings. The document indicates that the regional surveillance system, the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), would flag individuals as “suspicious” for engaging in a long list of religious behaviors like studying, reciting, or teaching the Quran without state permission, and other indicators of religious expression.<sup>196</sup>

Based on the dataset above, Uyghur and other Turkic religious leaders bore the brunt of these detentions and have been swept up for their current or past work as imams. Our dataset also tells us that in addition to being detained in camps, religious figures have been imprisoned and handed long prison sentences during this same period, when Chinese government data itself shows that prison sentencing increased dramatically in the region as the camp system exploded in size.<sup>197</sup>

In addition to putting direct pressure on imams themselves, the Chinese government has also undertaken a systematic campaign to modify or completely destroy religious and cultural sites like mosques, shrines, and cemeteries. The campaign began around 2016, which the government justified by pointing to safety concerns. In September 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) analyzed publicly available satellite imagery to show that:

approximately 16,000 mosques in Xinjiang (65% of the total) have been destroyed or damaged as a result of

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<sup>194</sup> A document obtained by Human Rights Watch shows that the regional government may deem those born after 1980 as suspicious. See “China: Big Data Program Targets Xinjiang’s Muslims,” December 9, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/09/china-big-data-program-targets-xinjiangs-muslims#>.

<sup>195</sup> Some of the categories include wearing a veil (or one’s wife wearing a veil), growing a beard, “religious extremist thought infection,” and possession of illegal media—presumably with religious content. See UHRP, “‘Ideological Transformation’: Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan.”

<sup>196</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China: Big Data Program Targets Xinjiang’s Muslims.”

<sup>197</sup> Chris Buckley, “China’s Prisons Swell After Deluge of Arrests Engulfs Muslims.”

government policies, mostly since 2017. An estimated 8,500 have been demolished outright, and, for the most part, the land on which those razed mosques once sat remains vacant.<sup>198</sup>

ASPI also found that another 30 percent of important Islamic sacred sites like shrines, cemeteries and pilgrimage routes had been demolished in East Turkistan, mostly since 2017, and another 28 percent damaged or altered. These findings remain consistent with reporting from UHRP,<sup>199</sup> as well as the Guardian and Bellingcat, all of whom found evidence of widespread destruction of religious sites.<sup>200</sup>

As a result, even if imams were not arrested or forced out of their mosques, the physical destruction of their places of worship means that they have no place to preach or pray. This illustrates a sort of one-two punch to religious freedom: first, by confining religious practices to mosques according to the law and second, by destroying the very mosques where religious practice is deemed legal. What is the government's end game if not the elimination of Islam altogether? It may be possible that these imams could take their teaching underground, but as noted at length above, the Chinese government has made it clear that it considers all religious activity outside the mosque illegal and surveils imams (and others) to such a degree that there is likely no "underground" left in the region.

While some officially recognized imams may be able to practice religion in state-circumscribed ways in East Turkistan today, mounting restrictions ensure that none of them have any real space to exercise genuine autonomy in either their teachings or their daily lives. Following the mass arbitrary detentions and sentencing of a large group of religious figures in 2017 and 2018, many religious figures are likely unwilling to do anything that might raise the ire of local officials who now report to the authorities. Facing

**This illustrates a sort of one-two punch to religious freedom: first, by confining religious practices to mosques according to the law and second, by destroying the very mosques where religious practice is deemed legal.**

<sup>198</sup> Australian Strategic Policy Institute, "Cultural erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang."

<sup>199</sup> UHRP, "Demolishing Faith."

<sup>200</sup> Lily Kuo, "Revealed: new evidence of China's mission to raze the mosques of Xinjiang" *Guardian*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/07/revealed-new-evidence-of-chinas-mission-to-raze-the-mosques-of-xinjiang>.

unprecedented surveillance and control in public and private, many imams also likely feel trapped within a system with no tolerance for even minor subversion. Today, many Uyghurs around the world find it difficult to imagine how Islam might survive as a religious practice and cultural identifier for millions of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan in years to come.

## A bleak future for Islam

Chinese repression in East Turkistan is not a new phenomenon. The assault on religious figures we are witnessing today is simply the most recent round in the accommodation-repression cycle. Since Xi Jinping took power in 2013, the CCP has been careening towards renewed Cultural Revolution-era policies after frustrated and half-hearted attempts at assimilating Uyghurs under the guises of “poverty alleviation” and “development.” The development that the government touted as the answer to “restive” regions was only ever development for some (specifically, for Hans), leaving little doubt why Uyghur dissatisfaction with Chinese rule only hardened over time.

Representatives of the Party-state attempted, and ultimately failed, to extinguish religiosity among the Uyghur population during the Cultural Revolution. While many of the old tactics like detentions, book burning, and the destruction of religious sites match what we see today, the targeted and sustained nature of policies like mass detention, mass imprisonment, and indoctrination have never been attempted before on the scale we are currently seeing. Nor did officials ever wield such enormous amounts of data about the population through ubiquitous surveillance.

Some of the imams we spoke with recognized these differences between the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the horrors of the present, and were not optimistic about the fate of Islam or the ability of the Uyghur identity itself to carry forward. When we asked Abduqeyyum if he buried some of his religious books rather than throwing them in the river in hopes that he might one day retrieve them, he told us that the local authorities had already bulldozed the cemetery where other books were buried, an important religious site for the local community and the final resting place of his own

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grandparents.<sup>201</sup> Publishers of some of these Islamic books have said that “[t]he persecution we are facing now is worse than [the Cultural Revolution].”<sup>202</sup> Abdurahman told us, “that’s why imams or people like myself who were able to escape . . . escaped. Those who couldn’t escape were put in the camps, or in prison. They were all taken away.” He understood that through these policies, the government was signaling to them, “Either you become Chinese or act Chinese, or you have to be erased.”<sup>203</sup>

Chinese government officials have, over time, seemed to underestimate just how deeply engrained religious sentiment is within the Uyghur population. This is not to say Uyghurs are a particularly pious people in general, but rather that Islam is so entwined with many expressions of Uyghur identity that it is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to fully separate the two. Through decades of Chinese rule, Uyghurs have resisted top-down pressure and orders to change these fundamental aspects of their identity.

Joanne Smith Finley argues that the Islamic revival among Uyghurs in the 2000s was primarily a response to the failure of state development policies in providing economic opportunities for Uyghurs.<sup>204</sup> Economic and cultural marginalization were the principal forces that led many Uyghurs to seek out alternative forms of affirmation, which Islam provided. Government restrictions pushed many Uyghurs to hold even more tightly onto aspects of their identities that distinguished them from the Chinese population.

Elke Spiessens has shown that resistance abroad has also emerged, noting that “even among non-activist Uyghurs, I encountered the ubiquitous concern of remembering, if not preserving, one’s Uyghur identity and passing on knowledge of Uyghur history and language to children, many of whom had never

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<sup>201</sup> UHRP interview with Abduqeyyum, August 2020.

<sup>202</sup> Emily Feng, “China Targets Muslim Scholars And Writers With Increasingly Harsh Restrictions,” *NPR*, November 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/21/932169863/china-targets-muslim-scholars-and-writers-with-increasingly-harsh-restrictions>.

<sup>203</sup> UHRP interview with Abdurahman, August 2020.

<sup>204</sup> Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, p. 266.



set foot on the Uyghur homeland.”<sup>205</sup> The policies we see today, as well as their impact on Uyghurs globally, will no doubt substantially alter the outward expression of this identity, but it remains to be seen what forms of resistance might emerge in the years to come.

The Chinese government’s flimsy grasp on understanding the intersection between Islam and the Uyghur identity begs the question whether they might be able to control or extinguish it altogether. Many of the imams we spoke with told us that Chinese authorities either do not care about the role of religion, or simply do not understand it at all. Given that the majority of the high-ranking officials in the region are Han rather than Uyghur, this ignorance of the Uyghur identity persists throughout the regional government.

Timothy Grose and James Leibold illustrate this ignorance through their analysis of the government ban on certain types of Islamic veils, while at the same time promoting the *doppa*, *etles*-style dresses, and braided hair. They argue that “the logic here is both paradoxical and ultimately flawed. First, the styles it deems as ‘modern’ and ‘normal’ are considered by many young Uyghur women ‘traditional’ or even ‘old fashioned,’ and out of touch with current fashion.”<sup>206</sup> The Chinese government has also tended to misunderstand the relationship between their own policies and the reaction of Uyghurs themselves. Justin Rudelson points out that Chinese leaders have found themselves in a dilemma throughout their history of rule over the Uyghur homeland:

[W]hen they suppress Islam, most Uyghurs feel oppressed and oppose the government; when they allow or encourage it, Uyghurs become more content with the government but their strengthened Islamic practice leads them to feel more separate from and apathetic toward Chinese society.<sup>207</sup>

**The policies we see today, as well as their impact on Uyghurs globally, will no doubt substantially alter the outward expression of this identity, but it remains to be seen what forms of resistance might emerge in the years to come.**

<sup>205</sup> Spiessens, “Diasporic Lives of Uyghur *Mollas*,” p. 291.

<sup>206</sup> James Leibold and Timothy Grose, “Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang: The Political and Societal Struggle to Define Uyghur Female Adornment,” *The China Journal* 76 (2020), p. 101.

<sup>207</sup> Justin Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, p. 48.

That the Chinese government so poorly understands the people it is suppressing has surely made the suppression all the more traumatic for its targets.

The Party-state has long claimed that it pursues genuine, equitable development and provides space for cultural expression to Uyghurs and other Turkic and non-Han peoples in spite of significant evidence to the contrary. Xi Jinping has chosen a different path than leaders before him. If the only instrument the Chinese government uses to assimilate Uyghurs further into Chinese society is a hammer, then imams, intellectuals, and other influential voices in Uyghur society will continue to look like nails to them.

## VII. Recommendations

### To the People's Republic of China

- Close the concentration camp system and release those detained, including all imams and religious figures;
- Cease the harassment and arbitrary detention of all Uyghur and Turkic imams and religious figures in all instances. Release all Uyghur and Turkic religious figures arbitrarily sentenced to prison terms and provide information to the public regarding their cases;
- Allow immediate access to an independent Commission of Inquiry and provide detailed records of arrest, detention, and imprisonment in “vocational” or “re-education” centers, to those relocated for “work placements,” and to those under house arrest;
- Immediately cease the destruction of all sites of cultural and religious value to the Uyghur people, including mosques, shrines, graveyards, and allow immediate reconstruction in consultation with the Uyghur population; and
- Remove limitations on the practice of religion for Uyghur children in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and expand the space for children to learn religion in various settings from family members and religious leaders.

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## To the United Nations

- Member States should establish a special session at the UN Human Rights Council to appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate human rights violations taking place in the Uyghur Region and develop strategies to end these violations;
- The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights should immediately make use of her independent monitoring and reporting mandate to investigate and gather information on the current situation in East Turkistan, and report to the Human Rights Council with her findings.
- The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief should send a letter to the Chinese government to urge the release of Uyghur and Turkic religious figures arbitrarily detained, and to urge respect for religious freedom in East Turkistan according to international standards;
- The Working Group on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention should send a letter to the Chinese government requesting detailed information on the cases of the imams and other religious leaders cited in the report; and
- The UN should engage in additional, cross-agency, multilateral action to press for accountability for religious persecution in China.

## To national governments

- Publicly and privately urge the Chinese government, at every possible opportunity, to end its campaign of mass, arbitrary detention, and to release all those detained or imprisoned without due process;
- Appoint a religious freedom ambassador with expertise in China in order to respond to religious persecution across the country;
- Provide immediate support to members of the Uyghur community residing in your country who have been

- threatened, harassed, or intimidated directly or indirectly by the Chinese government, including by offering asylum or relevant legal documents;
- Work in cooperation with national governments and form, strengthen, and mobilize international coalitions to obstruct further rights violations targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples; and
  - Implement commitments on atrocity and genocide prevention through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy efforts, and independently investigate and make appropriate legal determinations regarding the treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in China.

### **To governments with Muslim-majority populations**

- Substantively raise the issue of religious freedom for Uyghurs and other Turkic, Muslim-majority peoples in bilateral dialogue with the Chinese government, and urge the government to take immediate steps to reverse repressive policies targeting Islam;
- Publicly and privately urge the Chinese government to halt the destruction of mosques and shrines, and allow mosques to reopen;
- Urge the Chinese government to grant a government delegation unfettered access to Eastern Turkistan; and
- Organize public hearings including Uyghurs to help domestic populations better understand the situation in East Turkistan.

### **To civil society**

- Support and amplify the voices of the Uyghur community abroad, particularly those missing, or unable to communicate with, relatives and friends in East Turkistan;
- Continue to speak out loudly in opposition to the treatment of Uyghurs in East Turkistan and abroad;

- Closely monitor developments in the human rights situation on the ground in East Turkistan, and adapt and respond to new developments and trends; and
- Support and collaborate with Uyghur-rights activists and organizations abroad to highlight the plight of detained religious figures, particularly through religious freedom and faith-based organizations.



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