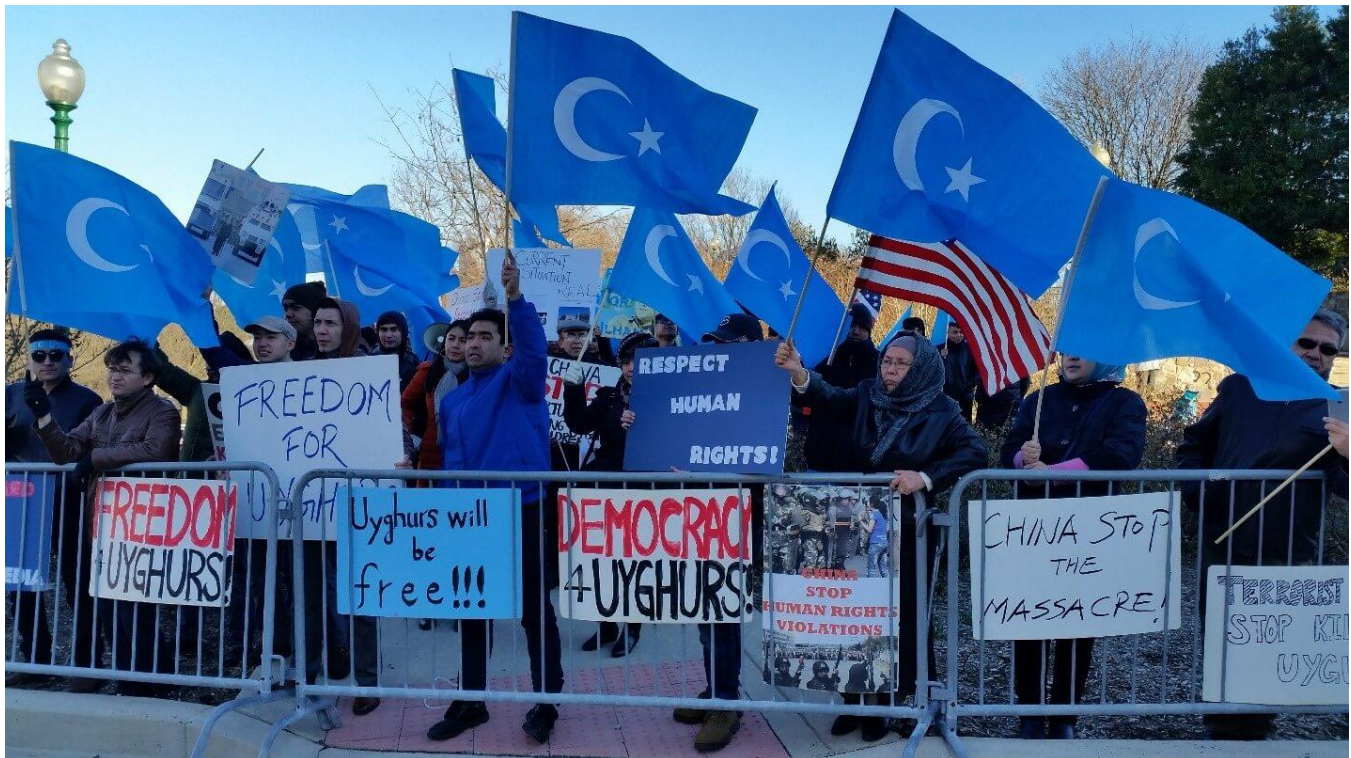




# Contemporary Colonialism: The Uyghurs Versus China

by Salih Hudayar  
February 13, 2017



Uyghur protest in front of the Chinese Embassy in Washington D.C., 2016

**A**LTHOUGH IT IS OFFICIALLY KNOWN AS THE **XINJIANG UYGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION (XUAR)**, the Uyghurs and their homeland are [autonomous in name only](#). Since the occupation of the Uyghur homeland of East Turkistan in October of 1949 by the People's Republic of China, the Uyghurs have been victims of Chinese state repression, colonial subjugation, discrimination,

and systematic ethnic and cultural genocide; ultimately becoming a nation at risk of being wiped out. They are comparable to various other nations of the world facing similar problems such as the Palestinians, Kashmiris, Kurds, and their well-known Tibetan neighbors. Their homeland in describing their situation is sometimes referred to as '[China's other Tibet](#)' or 'China's Palestine'. Sadly, the international community pays little attention to the case of the Uyghurs, while the world's governments often disregard them entirely when dealing with China.

Due to the lack of media attention and the deliberate distortion of Uyghur identity, history and the nature of the Uyghur-China conflict by the Chinese government, many people are given a false narrative of the realities concerning the Uyghurs; media [reports often inaccurately label them as 'Chinese Muslims'](#), when in reality they have no linguistic nor cultural similarities to the Chinese. Furthermore, following the aftermath of 9/11, China has taken advantage of the 'Global War on Terror' and the rise of Islamophobia amongst the international community to push forth a [fallacious narrative that the source of the Uyghur conflict is 'Islamic terrorism'](#), while also claiming that the Uyghur homeland has been a part of China since ancient times. There is very limited truth in these claims, as it has been well established through history and facts that the region remained largely independent of China until more recent times.



In order to accurately understand the current Uyghur-China conflict, it is imperative to understand who the Uyghurs are, what their culture is, along with the historical context regarding the events leading up to their current struggle.

### **Who are the Uyghurs?**

Genetic studies show that the Uyghurs are the [modern hybrid descendants of the indigenous Indo-European](#) and Turkic tribes that inhabited Central Asia. Numbering roughly 25 million worldwide with over [20 million within their homeland of East Turkistan](#), or what is otherwise known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China, the Uyghurs are the second largest ethnic group in Central Asia. According to some Uyghur activists, the Uyghurs number around 35 million, however official Chinese statistics put them around 12 million, a far cry from what the indigenous Uyghurs claim. Analyzing historical data from Russian, Turkish, Chinese, and Uyghur sources, Turkish historian Professor Dr. Mehmet Saray expressed in his book *Doğu Türkistan Türkleri Tarihi* [The History of



Eastern Turkistan's Turks] that the Uyghurs numbered roughly 24 million within East Turkistan as of 2010.

Due to the occupation and colonization of their homeland, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs have fled their traditional homeland often seeking refuge and settling in nearby Central Asian states, the Middle East, Turkey, and more recently in Europe and North America. Officially, there are over 500,000 Uyghurs in the independent Central Asian states, however Uyghur activists and diaspora groups claim there are [at least 1 million](#), with an estimated [25% of Uzbekistan's population having close blood ties to the Uyghurs](#). According to then Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Aric, there were more than [300,000 Uyghurs living in Turkey in 2010](#). Additionally, in 2013 the Saudi Labor Ministry stated there were some [50,000 Turkistanis \(Uyghurs\)](#) living in the kingdom. Although there hasn't been an official census, there is an estimated to be 50,000 or more Uyghurs living in Europe. Similarly, estimates put the Uyghur population in North America –mainly the United States and Canada–at around 20,000. Furthermore, there are an estimated 100,000 Uyghurs living in small diaspora communities, refugee camps, and detention centers across the rest of the world.

The majority of Uyghurs are Muslim and much like their Central Asian and Turkish brethren they follow the [Hanafi school of thought](#), one of the oldest and most liberal of the five main school of thoughts in Sunni Islam. There are also significant adherents of Sufi Islam, along with small pockets of Uyghur Buddhists, Christians, and Shamanists across Central Asia. Overall, most Uyghurs practice a moderate liberal form of Islam far from the 'religious extremist' misconception that the Chinese government claim; though in recent years some Uyghurs have become radicalized in response to China's repressive policies of cultural and ethnic genocide.



Location of East Turkistan

Although much of the aspects of Uyghur language and culture is moderately Turkic in origin, there are elements of Persian culture and language that coincide making up the unique hybrid Uyghur culture. The language of the Uyghurs is also called Uyghur, deriving from [Eastern Turkic or Chagatai Turkic](#). It is one of the oldest Turkic languages in use today. The Uyghurs in East Turkistan use the Arabic script for writing, whereas the majority of the Uyghurs in Central Asia use the Cyrillic alphabet system of writing, and Uyghur diaspora communities use both the Arabic script and Latin script interchangeably. It should also be noted that the traditional Uyghur script was [adopted by Genghis Khan in the 13th Century](#) and has been used by Mongols since then.

### Historical Background of the Uyghurs

The Uyghurs are one of the oldest ethnic groups in Central Asia with a history going back several thousand years. The term Uyghur, meaning “united or allied” emerged as [political confederation](#) of the various Turkic and Indo-European tribes that inhabited Central Asia in the 6th century. The modern Uyghurs are a hybrid mixture of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the Indo-European tribes of the

Tarim Basin. [Genetic research](#) conducted in 2008 revealed that the initial mixing between Hunnic-Turkic tribes and Indo-European tribes of the Tarim began between 2140-2920 years ago, repealing the dubious Chinese claims that the Uyghurs originated from Mongolia in the 8th century.

For millennia the Uyghur homeland of East Turkistan was ruled by ancient Indo-European tribes, discoveries of ancient Indo-European mummies prompted Uyghur historian Turghun Almas to conclude that the [Uyghurs have a history of over 6400 years](#). This bold statement by Turghun Almas resulted in the banning of his book Uyghurlar [The Uyghurs] by the Chinese government in 1992 which subsequently placed him under house arrest until his death in 2001. Uyghur organizations like the World Uyghur Congress, argue that Uyghur history in East Turkistan goes beyond 4000 years, challenging China's conflicting claim that the Uyghurs migrated from Mongolia in the 8th century.

In around 209 BCE, the [Turkic Huns \(Xiongnu\)](#) would invade the ancient Uyghur homeland intermixing with the indigenous Indo-European tribes. In around 110 BCE the Chinese Han Dynasty would launch a series of invasions into the Tarim Basin to control the Silk Road; however, it was only in 60 CE that the Han Dynasty would be able to seize parts of the Tarim Basin setting up a protectorate known as the Western Regions. With the death of the Ban Chao, the Chinese general who had conquered much of the Tarim Basin, in [102 CE the Han Dynasty lost its grip](#) on the region, restoring independence to the Indo-European and Turkic tribes.

Following the rise of Turks in the 6th century, Central Asia would be dominated by Indo-European and Turkic tribes. The Uyghurs would play a crucial role in establishing the Kokturk Khanate (552-744), the Uyghur Khanate (744-840), the Kara-Khanid Khanate (840-1212), Gansu Uyghur Kingdom (848-1036), and Idikut State (856-1335). Uyghurs would also play a crucial role in the administration of the Mongol Empire, Ghenghis Khan would adopt the Uyghur yasa law system and their script to govern his vast empire. It was through the Kara-Khanids that Islam began to replace the former Uyghur religions of Buddhism, Manicheanism, and Tengrism (Shamanism), however it wasn't until the 16th century that Islam prevailed as the dominant religion.

In the 18th century, the Uyghurs would decline politically, socially, culturally, and economically being weakened by internal power struggles and the rise of Sufi Khojas. In 1759, the Manchu Qing dynasty would invade Eastern Turkistan and make it a new colony, with the Uyghurs rebelling against Qing rule—and in 1863 breaking free and establishing [Kasgharia \(East Turkistan\)](#). However, caught in the middle of a rivalry between the British and Russians, in what became known as the ‘Great Game’, the Uyghurs would be invaded once again by the Qing dynasty and in 1884, the Uyghur homeland would formally be incorporated into the Chinese empire as ‘[Xinjiang](#)’, or what translates as the ‘New Territory’ in the Chinese language.

With the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, the Uyghur homeland was controlled by former Qing officials who governed the region independently of any state, but heavily under Russian influence. By the 1920s, nationalism began to take shape amongst the Uyghurs, with Uyghur political movements being established leading to an increase in the desire and push for independence. It was during this period that [the term Uyghur was revived](#) to define the non-nomadic Turkic peoples inhabiting East Turkistan. In 1931 Uyghurs rebelled in Qumul and on November 12, 1933 the various Uyghur warlords of Khotan, Turpan, Kashgar, Kucha, Aksu, and Qumul united under one banner and declared the [Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkistan \(TIRET\)](#). However, within several months it was invaded by the Guomindang (GMD). Due to the lack of international recognition – aside from Turkey – the TIRET was destroyed by the Chinese GMD forces. Though the TIRET was short-lived, it did leave a legacy and exactly 11 years later Uyghurs and Kazakhs would declare the formation of the [second East Turkistan Republic \(ETR\)](#) on November. 12, 1944.



Uyghur freedom fighters (Revolutionaries), 1933 – upon establishing the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkistan

Although the ETR received some international recognition, it became the victim of secret negotiations between the US and the Soviet Union and was [betrayed at the Yalta Conference](#) of 1945. Stalin would use the KGB to infiltrate the ETR leadership and, in August 1949, the senior leaders of the ETR including the President, Defense Minister, and Foreign Secretary were executed on the orders of Stalin for refusing to sign away the independence of the Uyghur nation. By September, 1949 Stalin would be airlifting Mao's troops into East Turkistan and dismantling the ETR, leaving the Uyghurs under Chinese Communist occupation. The ETR was officially dismantled on November 20, 1949 ending Uyghur independence and officially making their homeland a Chinese colony, leading to the subjugation of the Uyghur people that continues to this day.



## The current situation of the Uyghurs

Although [Mao Zedong had initially promised the Uyghurs the right self-determination](#) and a choice for independence or federated republic status (like that of the Soviet Union), he went back on his promises and established the so called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955. Yet the Chinese government would gradually launch policies to settle millions of Han Chinese to “modernize and develop” the Uyghur homeland, significantly changing the demography of the Uyghur homeland. Furthermore, in 1958 Mao launched the large-scale collectivization program which forced the Uyghurs to abandon their indigenous customs and traditions, forcing them to learn Chinese and embrace Chinese culture.



During the Cultural Revolution, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs were massacred by the Chinese regime for being “counter revolutionary and nationalists”. It was during this period that China [began to rewrite the history of the Uyghurs and East Turkistan](#), distorting the realities and claiming that “Xinjiang (East Turkistan), has always been a part of China since ancient times, and the Uyghurs are part of the

larger Chinese family.” Millions of Uyghurs would be killed by various means, including an estimated [750,000 who died as a result of 46 nuclear tests](#) in the Uyghur homeland. Yet over the decades, Uyghurs continued to resist Chinese domination, with numerous uprisings and demonstrations.

Following the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1989, [Uyghur militants launched an armed uprising on April 5, 1990](#), which was brutally crushed. However, with the independence of their Central Asian brethren in 1991, Uyghurs once again pushed to strive for theirs. Due to an increase in trade relations with the international community, China began to assert its economic dominance into Central Asia and across the globe to crush any sign of Uyghur political activity. Taking advantage of 9/11, [China launched its own ‘War on Terror’](#) to crush any and all forms of Uyghur dissent. Ultimately, China used the pretext of “combatting terrorism, and extremism” to ban the teaching of the Uyghur language and restrict religious and cultural practices, while making way for the influx of Han Chinese settlers.

Over the years China intensified its repressive policies on the Uyghurs and in [2009 demonstrations](#) erupted all across East Turkistan to protest the policies and demanding equality. The protests were brutally crushed and hundreds of Uyghurs were killed and tens of thousands more were detained as the international community stood in silence. In 2014 the Chinese government sentenced [Ilham Tohti](#), a well-known Uyghur economist professor, to life in prison on “separatism” charges after he asked the Chinese government to uphold its own constitution and honor Uyghur autonomous rights.

Now, [new settlement projects](#) are being constructed to accommodate Han Chinese settlers. Restrictions on freedom of movement have been imposed, and tens of thousands of Uyghurs are being detained on “terrorism” charges. On July 28, 2014, thousands of Uyghurs in the city of Yarkent protested against discrimination, inequality, extrajudicial detentions, and mass executions. The result was a [massacre of over 2,000 Uyghurs](#), all whom were labeled as “terrorists”, and again the international community stood silent. [China has barred Uyghurs](#) from obtaining passports, observing religious practices such as fasting during Ramadan, attending religious centers, holding large gatherings, and imposing forced abortion on Uyghur

families; turning the Uyghur homeland into an Orwellian state. Such restrictions have forced thousands of Uyghurs to take a perilous route and emigrate out of East Turkistan, leading to a [Uyghur refugee crisis](#) largely unheard of in the media and ignored by the international community.



Yet, at the same time it has [pushed disaffected Uyghurs into the arms of rebel groups and terrorist groups](#) fighting in Syria, with promises of one day assisting the Uyghurs in fighting against the Chinese occupation. On January 1, 2016 China launched a new Counter-terrorism law specifically designed to target the Uyghurs at home and abroad, leaving the Uyghurs extremely vulnerable amidst international silence. Additionally, China's continued assimilationist and colonial policies have radicalized the Uyghurs, forcing them to [turn towards violence as a recourse](#).

**China | Uyghur | East Turkistan | Injiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) |  
Uyghur history | Xinjiang Autonomous Region**

Fair Use relied upon. Reproduced for educational purposes only.