

SHIV NADAR
INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE DEEMED TO BE
UNIVERSITY
DELHI NCR

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR
HIMALAYAN
STUDIES

Issue Brief

No.1

July 2023

Turning a Blind Eye: West Asia and China's Persecution of the Uyghurs

Abu Zafar



© Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence

About the Author:

Dr. Abu Zafar is a Research Coordinator at the Centre for India West Asia Dialogue, New Delhi. His PhD from Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi is titled, 'China's West Asia Policy: A Case Study of the Media Discourse on the Civil War in Syria'. He can be reached at byzafar@gmail.com.

Cite this publication as:

Zafar, Abu. 2023. 'Turning a Blind Eye: West Asia and China's Persecution of the Uyghurs'. Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence. *Issue Brief*. No.1. July. 1-7.

Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence
NH-91, Tehsil Dadri, Gautam Budh Nagar District
Uttar Pradesh – 201314
INDIA
Ph: +91 120 7170100
E-Mail: chs.shss@snu.edu.in
Website: <https://chs.snu.edu.in>

Turning a Blind Eye: West Asia and China's Persecution of the Uyghurs

Abu Zafar

Introduction

A delegation of 34 members from the Arab League completed a four-day visit from 30 May to 2 June to Xinjiang's capital city, Urumqi, as well as to the historical city of Kashgar. While no official statement has been released by either the Arab League or the delegation, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserts that the delegation visited mosques, Islamic institutions, and local enterprises. They also reportedly attended "an exhibition on counterterrorism and de-radicalization", gaining "a first-hand experience of their happy life" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2023). It claims that the delegation, consisting of officials from Arab League countries and its secretariat, has expressed admiration for the role of the government and denounced the allegations of "ethnic genocide" and "religious persecution" as entirely baseless (*Global Times* 2023).

Rights groups advocating for the rights of the Uyghur population have criticized the Arab League's actions, arguing that such visits only serve to support Beijing's unsubstantiated narrative regarding the treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang (Campaign for Uyghurs 2023). This marks the second visit of its kind, following a previous delegation led by clerics from the UAE-based World Muslim Communities Council earlier in January this year, who also praised Beijing's policies in Xinjiang after their visit (Wani 2023). Prior to these visits, these countries had supported Beijing in the UN Human Rights Council, and their leaders had defended China

during their official visits to the country (Ensor 2019).

China is currently facing serious allegations of committing crimes against humanity, including genocide, against its Uyghur population and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups residing in Xinjiang. Human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch 2021; OHCHR 2022) maintain that Beijing has forcibly detained over a million Uyghurs within a vast network of facilities that the Chinese government refers to as "re-education camps". These detainees endure brutal physical and psychological torture, as well as forced labour. Particularly distressing is the treatment of female detainees, who are subjected to forced sterilization, sexual exploitation, and even rape (*Al Jazeera* 2021).

Numerous symbols and aspects of Muslim culture have been systematically suppressed. Since 2014, there have been intrusive searches of Uyghur homes, to closely monitoring any perceived "extremist" behaviours, and this includes even restrictions on fasting during Ramadan (Byler 2018). The availability of *halal* food, which adheres to Islamic dietary laws, has drastically diminished in Urumqi due to a government-led campaign against it (Kuo 2018). Furthermore, officials have demolished thousands of mosques, often under the pretext of substandard construction and safety concerns (Ruser et. al. 2020). The Communist Party of China (CPC) portrays Muslims as being "infected by an ideological illness", while issuing warnings

about the growth and dissemination of violent terrorism if religious extremism is not entirely eradicated (Samuel 2018).

Uyghur Demography

The Uyghurs, an ethnic group of Turkic origin, make up 44.96 percent of the total population in Xinjiang, while the Han Chinese account for 42.24 percent (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Toronto 2021). The Chinese Party-state has been involved in manipulating the demographic composition through various means. In recent decades, a substantial number of Han Chinese from other provinces have been relocated to Xinjiang in an attempt to alter the demography of the province (Li 2019) – a policy referred to as “Hanisation” or “Hanification” in Xinjiang. According to recent census data, the growth rate of the Han population in Xinjiang exceeds that of the Uyghur population (Lew 2021). Forced sterilization and other methods have affected the birth rate in the province, resulting in rates lower than the national average since 2017 (Maizland 2022).

China has consistently justified its actions in the name of countering terrorism and extremism. However, a 2022 report by the United Nations accused China of serious human rights violations (*United Nations News* 2022). While Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany have condemned the Chinese policies in Xinjiang, several Muslim-majority countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar and Bahrain, have lent their support for Beijing on the situation in Xinjiang (Putz 2020). In 2019, most of these were among those 45 countries that supported a statement in

the UN which declared, “China has undertaken a series of measures in response to threats of terrorism and extremism in accordance with the law to safeguard the human rights of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang”. The statement also asserted that “People of all ethnic groups enjoy their happy life in a peaceful and stable environment” (cited in Putz 2020). Later, in 2020, Qatar withdrew from the statement saying that it wants “to maintain a neutral stance” (Younes 2019). Despite demand from civil society and politicians, Iran, an important voice in the region, has been either silent on this issue or supports Beijing's version (World Bulletin, n.d.; Esfandiari 2020).

Turkey, which was previously a strong advocate for Uyghur rights, has also shifted its stance in recent years, influenced by various economic and political factors (Alta 2021). Collaboration between authoritarian leaders and compliant religious scholars in West Asia, is facilitating China's goal of assimilating Muslims into Han culture, and thereby, ensuring the fulfilment of Beijing's objective of “Sinicizing” Islam within China (Hoffman 2023).

Common Regime Interests

The support of these Muslim countries for China's behaviour often comes across as surprising and much speculation has emerged regarding the reasons behind their reluctance to advocate for the Uyghurs and pressurize Beijing over its actions. While it is true that many of these nations perceive China as an ally and valuable bilateral partner given economics and, in particular, weakening US influence in the region, the issue is more complex. This is because China also depends on

these countries for its own economic well-being, particularly in terms of energy requirements. Further, China's deepening engagement with West Asian countries – illustrated in its mediating the restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran earlier this year – extends beyond economic and geopolitical interests, and it is within these broader ties that we find plausible explanations.

First, there is a certain similarity in political culture between China and these countries. While West Asian nations follow distinct ideologies from that of China, they share a common framework in terms of governance – most of these countries, like China, are authoritarian in nature. In China, sovereignty belongs to the CPC, whereas in West Asia, it predominantly lies with the ruling family. In other words, in China the 'big family' of the CPC is everything and in West Asia, it is a much smaller family. To justify their rule, while the former uses the political-ideological euphemism of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics,' the latter uses the Islamic faith with their own interpretations. Dissent against the official ideological or religious line is considered a crime in either system, with the state wilfully suppressing any alternative interpretations.

The monarchies in the Arab world have always been anxious about revolutions and upheavals based on Islamic teachings and have taken actions against organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, that poses challenges to ruling regimes by advocating a more radical approach. These organizations also criticize rulers for corruption, inequality, and the denial of human rights, sparking a power struggle for religious and political influence in the region. This was the reason

these rulers were particularly apprehensive during the Arab Spring in 2011.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt have employed domestic Islamic institutions to safeguard their power and provide theological justifications that support the state's supreme authority. This strategy aims to delegitimize the Arab Spring, any other forms of alternate Islamic politics, and broader political dissent, within the framework of religion. In controlling the religious discourse, they promote a state-controlled version of Islam to nullify challenges to their authority (Hoffman 2023). Thus, both China and these countries in the Persian Gulf fear revolutionary politics that could pose a threat to their rule. Any pushback against the Party-state in Xinjiang has provided Chinese authorities with justification, to successfully convince the countries in the Persian Gulf against a common ideological adversary. Consequently, West Asian rulers have become allies of China in their joint efforts to exert control over religion and subordinate it to state power – both types of regimes are, therefore, on the same page.

Second, both China and countries in West Asia tend to label all forms of dissent as terrorism, justifying their actions as necessary counter-terrorism measures for their national security and sovereignty. The existence of groups like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) or the Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIM), along with the emergence of ISIS, has further bolstered this narrative. China has used every available opportunity to consistently raise its concerns at various international fora, claiming that militants from Xinjiang are joining insurgent groups in Syria (Zafar 2023: 116-117). In doing so, Beijing has

also sought to rationalize its oppressive actions against the general population in Xinjiang.

China's espousal of a policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign countries, also resonates with the authoritarian rulers in West Asia. This approach allows China to navigate the complex dynamics of the region, particularly during conflicts and political upheavals. As a result, China has cultivated a positive image among these nations by refraining from criticizing their governments in ongoing conflicts, including instances of violence, human rights abuses, and even wars. Further, China's criticisms of the US-led West's interventionist measures buttress a mutual alignment of interests. Clearly, it is a case of both parties living in glass houses unwilling to throw stones at the other.

As a result, Beijing has managed to successfully convince the West Asian countries that the issues in Xinjiang are purely internal and that there is no cause for external intervention. Moreover, to further strengthen its cause, the Chinese Party-state with its charm offensive has chosen to persuade and convince policymakers, religious leaders, and journalists in these countries, to adopt its perspective on the Uyghur issue (Andersen and Lons 2020: 102). Since the Arab Spring in 2011, there have been several instances where Beijing has aligned itself with the narratives of these countries, which contradict those of Western powers. A notable example being the case of the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, where China expressed its trust in the Saudi court's handling of the case (*Arab News* 2019).

In return, the West Asian countries actively support China's repression of Uyghurs, and even comply with Beijing's requests to arrest and deport Uyghur exiles residing in their jurisdiction back to China (*BBC* 2020). Chinese intelligence and security officers also frequently collaborate with their regional counterparts on the ground (Uyghur Human Rights Project n.d.). Even the Haj is not exempt from such actions, as there have been cases of Uyghurs from outside China performing the pilgrimage, being detained and subsequently deported to the country (*Radio Free Asia* 2020; Jardine 2022).

Conclusion

The actions of Muslim countries and their implicit support to China's treatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang are of significant concern. Despite the serious allegations of crimes against humanity, including genocide, countries in West Asia have withheld comment and aligned themselves to Beijing's policies. This can be attributed to a convergence of political, economic, and ideological factors – resemblances in their authoritarian modes of governance, similar strategies to respond to dissent. Furthermore, China's declared policy of non-intervention in domestic matters reassures authoritarian leaders in the region. Add to these, their economic dependence on China and the waning influence of the United States and Western powers in the region.

China has strategically employed a charm offensive in order to influence policymakers, religious leaders, and journalists in different countries to adopt its perspective on issues pertaining to the Uyghur. This could explain the comparatively less coverage of Uyghurs'

prosecution in Arabic media. These countries openly endorse China's efforts to repress the Uyghur population by engaging in actions such as apprehending and repatriating Uyghur exiles and cooperating with Chinese intelligence and security entities. Remarkably, the so-called civil society in these countries is either absent or talk very little on these issues. Moreover, multiple surveys indicate that compared to the United States and other Western nations, there is a growing level of positive receptiveness towards China among the common people in West Asia (Khurma 2023; Abdelbary and Al Lawati 2023). The limited number of dissenting voices observed in countries such as Iran (Esfandiari 2020), has not garnered substantial attention.

The support expressed by these nations for China's actions in Xinjiang raises concerns about their obligations to uphold international norms, including the fair treatment of religious and ethnic minority populations. With China's support and model, however, the prospects for any change in such behaviour in the near future is minimal.

KEYWORDS

China, Communist Party of China, Xinjiang, West Asia, human rights, propaganda, religious freedom, soft power, civil society, Sinicization

REFERENCES

Abdelbary, Mohammed. and Abbas Al Lawati. 2023. China Surpasses US In Popularity Among Arab Youth as Beijing Expands Middle East Footprint'. *CNN*. 21 June. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/21/middleeast/china-surpasses-us-mideast-survey-mime-intl/index.html#:~:text=More%20young%20Arab>

[s%20see%20China,relations%20firm%20ASDA%A%20BCW](#)

Al Jazeera. 2021. 'Uighur Tribunal Hears Evidence of Alleged China Abuses'. 4 June. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/4/uighur-tribunal-hears-evidence-of-alleged-china-abuses>

Alta, Kuzzat. 2021. 'Why Erdogan Has Abandoned the Uyghurs'. *Foreign Policy*. 2 March. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/why-erdogan-has-abandoned-the-uyghurs/>

Andersen, Lars Erslev. and Camille Lons. 2020. 'The Geopolitical Implications of China's Presence in the MENA Region'. In *The Role of China in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Beyond Economic Interests?* ed. Katarzyna W. Sidło EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Study 16. 88-108.

Arab News. 2019. 'Saudi Arabia, China Talk Human Rights, Xinjiang'. 25 December. <https://arab.news/mv7y6>

BBC. 'Uighurs in Exile: Arrested and deported back to China'. October 1, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08t0pfp>

Byler, Darren. 2018. 'China's Nightmare Homestay: Xinjiang's Uighur Children Monitor Their Parents'. *Foreign Policy*. 26 October. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/26/china-nightmare-homestay-xinjiang-uighur-monitor/>

Campaign for Uyghurs. 2023. 'CFU Condemns the Arab League's Propaganda Tour to East Turkistan'. 5 June. <https://campaignforuyghurs.org/cfu-condemns-the-arab-leagues-propaganda-tour-to-east-turkistan/>

Ensor, Josie. 2019. 'Saudi Crown Prince Defends China's Right to Put Uighur Muslims in Concentration Camps'. *The Telegraph*. 22 February. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/22/saudi-crown-prince-defends-chinas-right-put-uighur-muslims-concentration/>

Esfandiari, Golnaz. 2020. 'Ex-Lawmaker Raises Rare Criticism of Iran's Silence About China's Abuse of Uyghurs, Other Muslims'. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. 7 August. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ex-lawmaker-raises-rare->

[criticism-of-iran-s-silence-about-china-s-abuse-of-uyghurs-other-muslims/30771986.html](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/un-body-rejects-historic-debate-chinas-human-rights-record-2022-10-06/)

Farge, Emma, 2022. 'UN Body Rejects Historic Debate on China's Human Rights Record'. *Reuters*. 7 October. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/un-body-rejects-historic-debate-chinas-human-rights-record-2022-10-06/>

Global Times. 2023. 'Arab League's Visit to Xinjiang Rejects Western Accusations of Ethnic Genocide, Religious Persecution'. 5 June. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1291964.shtml>

Hoffman, Jon. 2023. 'Why China Has Found Willing Partners in the Middle East for Its Uyghur Repression'. *Dawn*. 5 May. <https://dawnmena.org/why-china-has-found-willing-partners-in-the-middle-east-for-its-uyghur-repression/>

Human Rights Watch. 2021. 'Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots: China's Crimes Against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims'. 19 April. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>

Jardine, Bradley. 2022. 'How the Arab World Became Complicit in China's Repression of the Uighurs'. *Time*. 24 March. <https://time.com/6160282/arab-world-complicit-china-repression-uighurs/>

Khurma, Merissa. 2023. 'China has a Growing Presence in Arab Hearts and Minds' *Wilson Center*. 5 June. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/china-has-growing-presence-arab-hearts-and-minds#:~:text=Many%20Arabs%20see%20China%20as.power%20will%20remain%20largely%20positive>

Kuo, Lily. 2018. 'Chinese Authorities Launch Anti-Halal Crackdown in Xinjiang'. *The Guardian*. 10 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/10/chinese-authorities-launch-anti-halal-crackdown-in-xinjiang>

Lew, Linda. 2021. 'China Census: Migration Drives Han Population Growth in Xinjiang'. *South China Morning Post*. 15 June. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3137252/china-census-migration-drives-han-population-growth-xinjiang>

Li, Wensheng. 2019. "'Hanification' of Xinjiang Through False Promises and Threats'. *Bitter Winter*. 27 June. <https://bitterwinter.org/hanification-of-xinjiang-through-false-promises-and-threats/>

Maizland, Lindsay. 2022. 'China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang'. Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). 22 September. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2023. 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on the US Senate's Passing of the So-called 'Strategic Competition Act of 2021' 5 June. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202306/t20230605_11089988.html

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). 2022. 'Final Assessment on the Situation of Human Rights in Xinjiang, China'. 31 August. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>

Pradhan, S. D. 2020. 'Dragon intensifies its ethnic cleansing programme in Xinjiang; justifies its removal from the permanent membership of UNSC'. *The Times of India*. 27 September. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/ChanakyaCode/dragon-intensifies-its-ethnic-cleansing-programme-in-xinjiang-justifies-its-removal-from-the-permanent-membership-of-unscl>

Putz, Catherine. 2020. '2020 Edition: Which Countries Are for or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?' *The Diplomat*. 9 October. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>

Radio Free Asia. 2020. 'Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia Deport Uyghurs to China, Ignoring Protest by Rights Groups'. 16 October. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deportation-10162020150910.html>

Ruser, Nathan. James Leibold, Kelsey Munro and Tilla Hoja 2020. 'Cultural Erasure: Tracing the Destruction of Uyghur and Islamic Spaces in Xinjiang'. Australian Strategic Policy Institute. 24 September. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>

Samuel, Sigal. 2018. 'China Is Treating Islam Like a Mental Illness'. *The Atlantic*. 28 August. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/china-pathologizing-uyghur-muslims-mental-illness/568525/>

The Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Toronto. 2021. 'Main Data of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region from the Seventh National Population Census'. 14 June. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220613171035/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>

United Nations News. 2022. 'UN Human Rights Chief Welcomes UN Resolution on China's Xinjiang, Calls for Concrete Action'. 31 August. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/08/125932>

Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP). 2022. 'Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between Arab States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs'. 24 March. <https://uhrp.org/report/beyond-silence-collaboration-between-arab-states-and-china-in-the-transnational-repression-of-uyghurs/>

Wani, Ayjaz. 2023. 'China's Fading Perception Management in Xinjiang'. Observer Research Foundation. 17 January. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/chinas-fading-perception-management-in-xinjiang/>

World Bulletin. 2009. 'Iranian Clerics Condemn China, Iran's Silence on Uighur Victims'. 19 July. <https://www.worldbulletin.net/archive/iranian-clerics-condemn-china-irans-silence-on-uighur-victims-h44728.html>

Younes, Ali. 2019. 'Activists Hail Qatar Withdrawal from Pro-China Text Over Uighurs'. *Al Jazeera*. 21 August. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/21/activists-hail-qatar-withdrawal-from-pro-china-text-over-uighurs>

Zafar, Abu. 2023. 'Civil War in Syria: Understanding the Chinese Response'. In Mujib Alam and Sujata Ashwarya (Eds.). *Arab Spring and its Legacies*. New Delhi: KW Publishers. 106-121.