

Confirmatory and Additional Accounts of Oppression and the Intents behind the Relaxation of Entry into East Turkistan

Hitting a Trough of the Genocidal Wave?



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Uyghur Transitional Justice Database (UTJD) is an independent nonprofit organization that focuses on the documentation of human rights violations committed against the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan (aka. Xinjiang) through the collection of testimonies and research-based advocacy. UTJD was founded in 2017 as a project of the Norwegian Uyghur Committee and became an independent nonprofit organization in 2019.

We have started building reality-based detailed 3D models of internment camps in VR, and possibly in the foreseeable future also 3D models of historical mosques, sacred tombs, and other cultural relics/sites that have been (fully or partially) demolished by the Chinese regime. We aim to create a virtual interactive museum in the future, featuring all things related to the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan.

Our work has been featured in various news outlets and in several documentaries. We publish reports and books, e.g., *100 Camp Testimonies* and *Remolding the Uyghurs to Fit the Han-ethnocentric Mold*. We also submit reports and policy recommendations to governments.

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Executive Summary

Following a decade of intense systematic persecution against the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan, the Chinese regime appears to have reduced its firepower in recent years. As the world struggled to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, China began welcoming tourists from an expanding list of countries after the introduction of its visa-free policy, a move believed to address the country's slowing economy, deflation concerns, and image repair needs. As of December 2024, citizens from 38 countries could travel to China visa-free.

Based on interviews conducted by UTJD between 2023 and 2024, this report presents confirmatory and additional accounts of oppression and investigates the intents behind the Chinese regime's (possibly provisional) relaxation of entry into East Turkistan.

In late 2013, the Chinese regime established what later became known as the reeducation internment camps in southern East Turkistan, initially targeting devout Uyghur Muslims with 15-day to 3-month detentions. By 2017, the term 'mass internment' was used in the general reportage to describe the sheer scale of the regime's internment drive across the region, which reportedly occurred in multiple waves: first targeting successful Uyghur entrepreneurs and those with strong religious convictions, then writers and intellectuals, and finally Uyghur government officials. During 2017–2019, Uyghurs lived in constant fear of night raids, with many sleeping fully clothed and keeping 'go-bags' ready. Arguably, the most shocking account came out of the interviews was that Uyghurs in general were so terrified of the extralegal/extrajudicial internment camps that some even chose to self-inflict imprisonment (in prisons) by bribing officials.

While the regime claimed that all internees "graduated" by late 2019, many were actually transferred to prisons or forced labor factories. By 2023/2024, the regime appeared to have adopted more covert internment tactics. Arbitrary internment continued in 2024, though reportedly with shorter durations than before. Reasons for internment in recent years have been expanded to include for example criticizing interethnic marriages.

Uyghurs who chose to travel to East Turkistan face intense scrutiny and pressure to become informants. The regime has also continued its cultural erasure efforts by demolishing mosques, Uyghur shrines, and cemeteries. Uyghur children can now barely speak Uyghur due to the regime's relentless Sinicization efforts. Uyghur residents have been forced out of traditional Uyghur neighborhoods in for example Kashgar old town, which has been turned into a Disneyesque theme park for tourists.

To a casual observer, with its visa-free policy China aims to boost tourism, attract foreign investment, and improve its global image. However, with respect to East Turkistan, the Chinese regime seeks to mask and whitewash its various human rights abuses under a veneer of "normalcy"

curated for tourists. While the relaxation of entry restrictions into East Turkistan is projected as a gesture of openness, we believe it is a calculated move within the regime's broader strategy, entailing multiple covert intents beyond the regime's obvious attempt at image repair.

Beijing's primary intent is to counter international criticism of its human rights abuses in East Turkistan. By inviting foreign tourists and curating controlled experiences, the authoritarian party-state seeks to present a narrative of peace, prosperity, and normalcy. However, tourists are restricted to approved sites. Furthermore, among the interviewees were non-Uyghur EU citizens, who told UTJD that they had been followed by plainclothes officers during their travels in East Turkistan in 2024.

Additional intents behind the relaxation of entry into East Turkistan include:

- Diminishing the momentum of Uyghur rights advocacy on the global stage
- Facilitating surveillance of the Uyghur diaspora
- Creating divisions among Uyghurs in the diaspora, undermining the unity needed for effective rights advocacy
- Aiming to achieve broader economic and geopolitical ambitions by transforming East Turkistan into a major business hub for South and Central Asia

Introduction

Anyone who is glancingly familiar with the Uyghurs knows that the efforts exerted by the Chinese regime to persecute them have intensified over the past decade. Dozens of Western news outlets have been continuously covering various aspects of this state-directed¹ persecution since 2017. This continuous stream of news coverage has caused China a major reputational damage on the world stage. The regime's repression and its efforts to successfully disintegrate democracy in Hong Kong also garnered negative views among the foreign publics in the democratic world. The already badly bruised global image was further disfigured by the regime's cover-up of the initial COVID-19 outbreak and its refusal to cooperate on ascertaining the COVID-19 origin.

As China didn't intend to isolate itself from the world, it necessitated an image repair campaign. Simultaneously, like elsewhere in the world China's economy took a bad hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its sluggish economy also needed a boost. As reported, against a backdrop of slowing economy and possible deflation, China introduced a mostly unilateral 15-day visa-free policy to a growing list of countries, the apparent intents of which were to boost its tourism, attract foreign investment, and improve its international reputation.²

In the past, i.e., before the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens of only a handful of countries could travel to China for a period of up to 15 days without applying for a visa beforehand. This policy was suspended during the Chinese regime's stringent heavy-handed COVID-19 restrictions, and was not resumed until late July of 2023. Four months later, it was extended to Malaysia and five EU countries, namely France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, and its validity period was initially set to a year, until November 30, 2024. As more and more EU and non-EU countries were added to the list, the validity period was extended to late December of 2025. Unlike China's 72/144-hour visa-free transit policy, which is for citizens of 54 countries (as of mid-2024), this 15-day visa-free policy (in principle) affords freedom of movement across China, including East Turkistan. As of December 2024, citizens of 38 countries could travel to China visa-free.

According to the official Chinese statistics, the first half of 2024 China had seen 14.6 million arrivals, around 2.5 times more arrivals than the same period of 2023, where the majority of which benefited from the visa-free policy, but still way below the 24 million arrivals in the first half of 2019, i.e., pre-COVID levels (Wang, 2024).

¹ Zenz, A. (2021, November 27). "The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction." *The Uyghur Tribunal*. <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Transcript-Documents-08.pdf>

Zenz, A. (2022). The Xinjiang Police Files: Re-education camp security and political paranoia in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, 3, 1–56. <https://doi.org/10.25365/jeacs.2022.3.zenz>

² Wang, V. (2024, July 31). What's It Like Traveling to China These Days? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/31/world/asia/china-travel-visas-explained.html>

Also in 2023, beginning probably around mid-2023, prior to the introduction of the 15-day visa-free policy, the Chinese regime made the visa application process easier for the Uyghurs in the diaspora. Many Uyghurs have benefitted from this relaxation of entry into East Turkistan to visit their loved ones, and by doing so, they, knowingly or not, helped the regime come closer to their intents. As the regime rolled out its 15-day visa-free policy to a growing list of both EU and non-EU countries, the number of Uyghurs who traveled from these countries to East Turkistan also increased.

As a matter of course, in the wake of a decade of intense state-directed persecution of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan, e.g., mass internments and sterilization of Uyghur women, foreign nationals can also visit East Turkistan if they so choose. And many have indeed done so.

We reached out to over 150 people and requested interviews, but only 20 agreed to be interviewed. We have conducted interviews with 19 individuals over the course of 2024, and with one individual in late 2023, totaling nearly 33 hours of recorded material. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, and the interviewees can be grouped into the following categories: Uyghurs who either visited or left East Turkistan in recent years; former internees; foreign tourists who visited East Turkistan in 2024; and experts.

This report aims to determine whether the Chinese regime has ceased sending Uyghurs to reeducation internment camps in 2024 and to examine the regime's intents behind the possibly provisional relaxation of entry restrictions into East Turkistan. It also provides confirmatory and additional accounts of oppression, shedding further light on the approximate start of the extralegal and extrajudicial internments, as well as the conditions during the peak period of mass internments. Additionally, the experiences of a handful of foreign tourists who took advantage of the 15-day visa-free policy and visited East Turkistan in 2024 will also be discussed.

Background

Uyghurs, predominantly Muslims, are a Turkic-speaking people, the majority of whom (probably around 12 million) reside in the geographically central parts of Eurasia, namely East Turkistan (aka. Xinjiang— ‘new territory’ in Mandarin). After defeating the Nationalist party-state, the Chinese Communist regime annexed much of the former dependencies (as opposed to imperial territories) of the Qing empire and founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, i.e., East Turkistan and Tibet, but it failed to occupy the Mongolian People’s Republic and Taiwan (see Thum, 2018; Sperling, 2008). Moreover, as Millward, the historian of China and Central Asia, points out in one of his lectures, it is reasonable to refer to East Turkistan and Tibet as the colonies of the PRC.³

Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan have been subjected to unprecedented levels of state violence since the mid-2010s. This intensified persecution was the corollary of Beijing’s Han-ethnocentric unity narrative and the “political paranoia” (Zenz, 2022), where the former may constitute a major part of Xi Jinping’s legacy-making ambition, or it could be simply interpreted as the next phase of settler colonialism, based on various atrocities already inflicted on the Uyghurs.⁴

At the 18th National Congress of the CCP, which took place in November 2012, right before Xi Jinping became the head of the PRC, the Chinese regime’s unity narrative foreshadowed its ethnocidal intent — to firmly forge the *Zhonghua* national collectivity consciousness (铸牢中华民族共同体意识). This new catchphrase became a primary objective in all of the policies toward ethnic minorities and in every aspect of the governance of China’s colonies (e.g., East Turkistan and Tibet). More than a decade later, it continues to take precedence over the regime’s all other objectives, according to a speech given by Xi Jinping at the ninth collective study session of the 20th Politburo of the CCP on October 27, 2023 (Wang & Wang, 2024). It was also highlighted by Wang Huning, a top CCP official, during his recent visit to East Turkistan in late October, 2024.⁵ Further, this catchphrase is also present on an ordinary public notice sign, as shown in Figure 1.

³ Millward, J. (2021, October 25). Decolonizing Chinese Historiography. (Video lecture). *East Asia Program, Cornell University*. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/items/f0500877-ef84-44d8-a5fe-3584a9faf56d>

⁴ Here the *political paranoia* refers to the regime’s exaggerated interpretation of a handful of violent acts born out of indignation and resistance amongst the Uyghurs as a national security threat constituted by the whole Turkic Muslim populations of East Turkistan.

⁵ Ürümchi Evening Post. (2024, October 24). 王沪宁在新疆调研时强调 坚持铸牢中华民族共同体意识主线 在中国式现代化进程中更好建设美丽新疆. [‘While on his official research trip to Xinjiang, Wang Huning emphasized the importance of strengthening the core concept of *Zhonghua* national collectivity consciousness and how to further build the beautiful Xinjiang in the modernization era with Chinese characteristics’]. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_cNbQRoellF3h8bL64N7g

Figure 1

A public notice sign in East Turkistan that read, “Friendly reminder: Tourists are kindly requested to refrain from entering religious activity venues. To firmly forge the Zhonghua national collectivity consciousness.”



The regime’s unity narrative with a specific phraseology directed toward the Turkic peoples of East Turkistan — “every ethnic group of Xinjiang is a family member linked to the bloodline of the Chinese race” (新疆各民族是中华民族血脉相连的家庭成员) — became widely used around 2018, when the mass internments of Uyghurs were at their peak. This juxtaposition of the regime’s unity narrative and its extrajudicial mass internments of Uyghurs demonstrates the sheer irony and the (persistent) contradiction in the Chinese regime’s modus operandi.

The regime aims to firmly establish a culturally homogeneous national identity known as *Zhonghua Minzu* (‘Chinese race’) based on the Han Chinese mold, and in so doing, all non-Han heterogeneity is bound for elimination (Tobin, 2020). In other words, all Turkic Muslim characteristics that do not fit the Han Chinese ethnocentric mold will be forcibly eliminated. Uyghurs’ Turkic Muslim identity is deemed a threat by the party-state, so it constantly attempts to negate the Turkic identity of the Uyghurs while stating how Uyghurs are actually linked to the bloodline of the Chinese race. For instance, in an article authored by Xu (2018) representing the CCP viewpoint, the Turkic ancestry of the Uyghurs was called into question, stating that it was a sheer fabrication. Furthermore, Uyghurs

are entangled “in webs of surveillance and biometric control that restricts their movement and cultural practices” (Byler, 2021b, p. 8).

In pursuit of *Zhonghua Minzu* national identity, or in the remolding process, coupled with political paranoia, the Chinese regime under Xi Jinping has committed a series of atrocities against the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims of East Turkistan — mass internments,⁶ forced contraception, sterilizations, and abortions,⁷ as well as a likely practice of forced organ harvesting.⁸ The regime also knowingly implemented mass inter-generational separation (Wang & Kang, 2018; Zenz, 2019a). With an estimated one to three million Uyghurs (aged between 15 and 73)⁹ incarcerated in various types of internment facilities, many Uyghur children have been deprived of one or both parents. Countless families have been coercively separated. In some cases, although the relatives or extended families could take care of the children of the interned, they were not allowed to do so. Thousands of Uyghur children have been forcibly sent to state-run boarding facilities (often fortified with physical security measures) and orphanages, where they are subjected to intensive Mandarin instruction and Han-culture indoctrination. Furthermore, the use of Uyghur forced labor surged following the regime’s mass internment campaign (Buckley & Ramzy, 2018, 2019; Murphy & Elimä, 2021; Xu et al., 2020; Zenz, 2019b, 2023), though local authorities (including various XPCC divisions)¹⁰ in southern East Turkistan had long subjected Uyghurs to forced labor in one form or another, widely referred to as *hashar* amongst the Uyghurs.

After examining a wide range of evidence — including confidential speeches by central CCP officials such as Xi Jinping, expert witness statements, former internees’ testimonies, research papers, investigative reports, and evidence of birth suppression measures and policies targeting the Uyghurs, the Uyghur Tribunal issued its judgement on December 9, 2021. It concluded that,

⁶ Sudworth, J. (2018, October 24). China’s Hidden Camps: What’s happened to the vanished Uighurs of Xinjiang? *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idx-sh/China_hidden_camps

Kâinat, E. (2022). *100 Camp Testimonies: Arbitrary Incarceration, Forced Labor, Forced Abortion/Sterilization, and Forced Family Separation*. Uyghur Transitional Justice Database. <https://shorturl.at/cGt3O>

⁷ Zenz, A. (2020). Sterilizations, IUDs, and mandatory birth control: The CCP’s campaign to suppress Uyghur birthrates in Xinjiang. *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Zenz-Internment-Sterilizations-and-IUDs-UPDATED-July-21-Rev2.pdf?x42750>

The Associated Press. (2020, June 29). China cuts Uighur births with IUDs, abortion, sterilization. <https://apnews.com/269b3de1af34e17c1941a514f78d764c>

⁸ Robertson, M. P. (2022). Predatory biopolitics: Organ harvesting and other means of monetizing Uyghur ‘surplus’. In M. Clarke (Ed.), *The Xinjiang emergency: Exploring the causes and consequences of China’s mass detention of Uyghurs* (pp. 227–271). Manchester University Press. <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526153111/>

⁹ Sudworth, J. (2022, May). The faces from China’s Uyghur detention camps. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/85qihtvw6e/the-faces-from-chinas-uyghur-detention-camps>

We know for a fact that Uyghurs above the age of 80 were also sent to reeducation internment camps. For example, Muhammed Salih Damolla, a prominent Uyghur Islamic scholar, was at the age of 82 when he was interned. Unfortunately, around 40 days after his internment, he died. Eckert, P. (2018, January 29). Uyghur Muslim Scholar Dies in Chinese Police Custody. (Reported by Shohret Hoshur and Alim Seytoff and translated by Alim Seytoff). *RFA*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/scholar-death-01292018180427.html>

¹⁰ XPCC stands for Xinjiang Production Construction Corps, a colonial institution that “functions as a regional government, a paramilitary organization, a bureau of prisons, a media empire, an educational system, and one of the world’s largest state-run corporate enterprises” (Murphy et al., 2022, p. 4).

according to legal standards, the Chinese regime has committed crimes against humanity and genocide against the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in East Turkistan.¹¹

In January 2021, the United States declared that the Chinese regime, through its “systematic attempt,” was committing ongoing genocide against the Uyghurs, which initiated the genocide designation from five other democratic countries: Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Lithuania, and France. Following the UN’s long-overdue/long-delayed¹² report released on August 31, 2022 — which, while avoiding the genocide designation, found that China’s treatment of the Uyghurs had constituted crimes against humanity — a coalition of 50 countries signed a joint statement expressing grave concerns about human rights violations against the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in East Turkistan.¹³

Although the news of the mass internments of Uyghurs began to filter in from East Turkistan in 2017, the Chinese regime’s reeducation campaign with arbitrary detention started much earlier, which will be discussed in the following section of the present report. Beijing refers to the reeducation internment camps as vocational education and training centers. Interestingly, in September 2020, the regime itself indirectly confirmed both the scale and the approximate start of the camp system in its officially issued white paper entitled *Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang* — “Every year from 2014 to 2019 Xinjiang provided training sessions to an average of 1.29 million urban and rural workers, of which 451,400 were in southern Xinjiang.”¹⁴

Uyghurs are subjugated under a system that “creates a criminalization of normative behavior and normalizes inter-personal cruelty” (Byler, 2021b, p. 8). Past (religious) doings and “deviant” behaviors became reasons good enough to be persecuted, e.g., having attended a Koran study lesson in the past, or growing a beard. In late 2014, the Chinese regime issued a booklet entitled *The Basics to Identifying Religious Extremist Activities — 75 different signs of religious extremism*, e.g.,

¹¹ The Uyghur Tribunal. (2021, December 9). Uyghur Tribunal Judgment. <http://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Uyghur-Tribunal-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>

¹² This UN report was long-overdue in that it should have come out by the end of 2018, if not earlier, when the Chinese regime’s mass internment drive had already been widely reported and investigated by various news outlets and researchers for over a year. It was also long-delayed because the Chinese regime repeatedly made strenuous efforts to prevent the report from being published. McMurray, J. (2022, September 1). The UN’s report on the Uyghurs nearly didn’t see the light of day, thanks to China. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/01/un-report-uyghurs-china-michelle-bachelet-human-rights-abuses>

¹³ The joint statement is available at https://estatements.unmeetings.org/estatements/11.0030/20221031/1oB1Hw211sv3/E9l0Gk2e71BE_en.pdf

¹⁴ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China. (2020, September). *Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang*. http://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/pdf/Employment_and_Labor_Rights_in_Xinjiang.pdf; Lau, M. & Lew, L. (2020, September 17). China defends its ‘vocational training centres’ in Xinjiang white paper. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3101986/china-claims-vocational-training-given-nearly-13-million-people>

using the popular messaging app WhatsApp or VPN (virtual private network).¹⁵ Everyone has an online ID (社交账号), and all online activities are surveilled. “The slightest misstep can be read as confirmation of their inherent criminality” (Byler, 2022, p. 159). Further, the public was encouraged to report to the police whenever they bore witness to one or several of 75 signs of religious extremism, and countless Uyghurs had been sent to internment camps for what supposed to be their normative behavior (Smith Finley, 2019; Greer, 2018; Byler, 2021a).

In the leaked CCP internal documents and directives, explicit guidelines and operations manual were given to the local authorities running the internment camps, which ranged from escape prevention measures, the dehumanizing instructions, and AI-driven internments to Xi Jinping’s support for the mass internment drive (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2019; ICIJ, 2019; Ramzy & Buckley, 2019; Zenz, 2022). For instance, Chen Quanguo, the former CCP secretary of East Turkistan, urged local authorities to “round up everyone who should be rounded up.”¹⁶

The party-state always states that China is a country governed by the rule of law (法治国家), but as a techno-authoritarian state that has systematically carried out the abovementioned atrocities and human rights violations against the Uyghurs, China is undoubtedly a country governed by the will of the CCP. Between 2015 and 2017, in its persistent efforts to persecute and further restrict the religious practices of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims and “legalize” the reeducation internment camp system, the regime introduced a new counter-terrorism law (amended in April 2018), de-extremification regulations (amended in October 2018), and a revision of the religious affairs regulations (last amended in early 2024). However, as per usual the language used in these regulations and law was vague and has catch-all terms; but more importantly, there still was no legal basis for internment, or the physical restriction of personal liberty (Clarke, 2018).

Qualitative Analysis

Drawing on the interviews conducted in the course of 2024 (the last of which from late October) and one from late 2023, the present section attempts to shed further light on the inception of the regime’s reeducation efforts and the camp system, the intense fear that permeated all of Uyghur society during the peak of mass internments, the societal situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, post-COVID developments, and the intents behind the Chinese regime’s possibly provisional relaxation of entry into East Turkistan. This report makes an intentional effort to anonymize the interviewees who specifically requested anonymity for fear of potential retaliation or adverse actions from the Chinese regime; moreover, some details have been withheld due to security concerns.

¹⁵ Phenix News (凤凰资讯). (2014, December 24). 新疆部分地区学习识别75种宗教极端活动 [On the Recognition of 75 Signs of Religious Extremism in Xinjiang]. *Observer Net* (观察者网). <https://archive.ph/TlazC>

¹⁶ Ramzy, A., & Buckley, C. (2019, November 16). ‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>

Confirmatory and additional accounts of oppression

As widely reported, the Chinese regime's mass internments of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples began in early 2017, but the reeducation campaign with arbitrary internment on a smaller scale started almost half a decade earlier. Around 2010, it was said that the Chinese authorities were planning to build dormitories for both junior high and high schools in southern East Turkistan, turning them to boarding schools. In the following years, as more and more such dormitory buildings popped up on the outskirts of the cities, it became clear that those dormitory buildings were actually reeducation internment camps.

The reeducation internment camp system started around 2013, according to one of our Uyghur interviewees, primarily in southern East Turkistan, e.g., in Aksu and Kashgar regions. The regime's early reeducation efforts entailed an indoctrination period in reeducation internment camps at local level, between 15 days and 3 months or so, during which one could not freely leave the facility. "Government and state media reports show that reeducation efforts, among especially the Uyghur population, began in late 2013 and gradually became more institutionalized" (Zenz, 2018, p. 103). For instance, according to an essay written by a Chinese teacher, the local authority in Chapchal County (Ili Prefecture) held a 15-day (between March 25 and April 8, 2015) reeducation program, during which Uyghur internees were not allowed to leave the facility due to the closed-off management style (全封闭管理), i.e., all movement in and out of the internment facility was tightly controlled.¹⁷ It was to all intents and purposes an arbitrary detention, initially targeting Uyghurs who prayed daily or grew beard. "[B]y late 2015 the institutional foundations for the mass internments were largely in place" (Zenz, 2024b, p. 14).

One of our Uyghur interviewees said that his father had actually helped build one of the camps in the Kashgar region, but his father thought it would be a dormitory building. Around mid-2017, his father was interned. Like countless many other Uyghurs, his father and his family were duped into believing that the reeducation period would be 15 days, but his father had been held in different internment camps for more than two years. It was a common practice in the camp system that during their internment, internees would be moved between various internment camps multiple times before being released, sent to a factory as a forced laborer, or transferred to a prison with a lengthy prison term. After being released from the camp, his father became a man of few words, in contrast to his talkative self before internment. Only after persistent asking did his father comment on one of the camps he was held at: "Not in my wildest dream did I ever think that I was building a holding cell for myself at the time."

¹⁷ This Year's Graduating Students Net (应届毕业生网). (2017, November 7). 2017年教师去极端化学习心得体会范文 [2017 Reflection Model Essays of Teachers on De-extremification]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180528005928/http://yjbys.com/xindetihui/fanwen/863368.html>

The Chinese regime's internment drive occurred in multiple waves. Initially, the regime sent successful Uyghur entrepreneurs and those with strong religious convictions to internment camps. And Uyghurs who previously traveled to Türkiye and those who previously studied Islam were also swept up in the first internment wave. For example, back in 2006, one of our interviewees was asked to buy some copies of Koran for her relative who lived in southern East Turkistan. At the time the holy book Koran was not banned and was freely available in the bookstores. But 11 years later this relative was persecuted and sent to an internment camp because of her past deviant behavior — buying some copies of Koran. The second internment wave targeted writers and the intelligentsia, while the third wave targeted Uyghurs in various government organs and departments, including those who worked at neighborhood watch units (社区).

Between 2017 and 2019, when the regime carried out a clampdown on the two-faced¹⁸ Uyghur individuals targeting primarily Uyghur officials, the following propaganda slogan was used: 发声亮剑，敢于发声，勇于亮剑，坚决与“三股势力”作斗争 (literal translation: Speak out and show your sword, dare to speak out, be courageous in showing your sword, resolutely fight against the ‘three forces’¹⁹). The slogan emphasized collective action against the Uyghurs, encouraging everyone to inform on those two-faced Uyghurs, largely based on the abovementioned 75 signs of religious extremism. For instance, Ahat Sayit, a former Uyghur county chief, was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to 20 years for being ‘two-faced’ and for wearing a traditional Uyghur shirt while in office, at a time when wearing ethnic clothing was already banned.²⁰

As more and more Uyghurs were sent to the camps in 2016/2017, an intense fear permeated Uyghur society as a whole. The mass internment in southern East Turkistan began in 2016, while in Ürümqi it started around April/May, 2017 (if not earlier), before which neighborhood watch units across Ürümqi confiscated Uyghurs' passports. In Ürümqi, the police would come in the middle of the night with their black vehicles, with their lights flashing but without sirens. During that time, all Uyghurs felt anxious. People would take a peek out the window to see in front of which building the police parked at and guess who could have been taken away from their neighborhood. It was such a terrifying time and nerve-racking for all Uyghurs, constantly distressed with “Could it be my turn tomorrow?”

Many Uyghur families put a go-bag at the door in case of an unexpected police raid at night; moreover, people slept with their clothes on. When someone was taken away by the police, no one would dare to ask where they were sent to. No one could find out the whereabouts of the interned as everyone was looking out for themselves and their families and avoided potential trouble with the

¹⁸ The term “two-faced” is used to refer to Uyghurs, especially Uyghur officials and intelligentsia, who show signs of disloyalty to the CCP or sympathetic tendencies toward other Uyghurs.

¹⁹ The “three forces” (三股势力) refer to terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

²⁰ Hoshur, S. (2024, August 8). Former Uyghur official confirmed serving jail sentence for ‘two-faced’ actions. *Radio Free Asia*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/former-official-confirmed-serving-jail-sentence-two-faced-actions-08082024143049.html>

police. All Uyghurs were frightened to talk, and could't ask each other about what had happened or who had been taken away. People wouldn't even dare to ask their neighbors about their disappeared family members. Even if asked, people wouldn't have answered because the very act of answering would endanger themselves. Uyghurs had lived in that intense state of mind for the following three years till late 2019.

One of the control measures used during the mass internments had been the restriction of movement. One Uyghur interviewee said that a married Uyghur couple could't live in the same apartment in the city of Ürümqi since they were previously registered in different districts of Ürümqi. One district in Ürümqi, e.g., Tengri Tagh district, wouldn't accept people from another district in the same city. In other words, Uyghurs couldn't officially change their addresses from one district to another.

Further, people were so terrified of the internment camps that some would rather go to prisons instead. Two of our Uyghur interviewees independently said that some Uyghurs, especially those with financial resources and fame in Uyghur society, bribed people in authorities into sending their loved ones to prisons, preemptively removing the possibility of them being taken away and sent to internment camps. It was better to be sent to prisons than to reeducation internment camps, because the former could largely guarantee the safety of the imprisoned, while the latter was operated extralegally, where the interned could not be easily traced and they faced indefinite internment. Moreover, the overall health of the interned would deteriorate in the camps. If held in a prison, one's family members are at least allowed for a visit once a month, and one can also receive clothes and food from their family. There are certain daily routines that are maintained in prisons, e.g., inmates can go outside and enjoy the sun. Therefore, it's relatively better to be held in a prison than in a reeducation camp. For instance, one Uyghur family spent around 100,000 yuan (around US\$13,800) to send the husband (a tradesman) to a prison for multiple years. Another Uyghur man, an acquaintance of one of our Uyghur interviewees, also chose to go to prison back in 2017, and was released 5 years later in 2022. The number of people who chose to self-inflict imprisonment might not be high as those who received the bribes wouldn't want to arouse the suspicions of law enforcement.

Just like in administrative detention centers, torture and mistreatment of internees in reeducation internment camps are reportedly commonplace. According to one of the Uyghur interviewees who had been subjected to arbitrary detention in the past, i.e., before the regime's mass internment drive, local authorities and CCP officials would often abuse their power and send Uyghurs to administrative detention centers for an "offense" as minor as a verbal argument with a local CCP official.

Distrust among the Uyghurs grew significantly in the midst of the regime's mass internment drive. People kept their opinions to themselves, avoided discussing sensitive subject matters such as

religion, and minimized their participation in social gatherings. The reason for the social avoidance was the fear of internment. Uyghurs feared that if they said something to their neighbors or friends that might be perceived as wrong or unacceptable by the regime, they could be sent to reeducation internment camps. Furthermore, one of the three letters the internees are forced to write in the camps on a weekly basis is the letter of allegation (揭发书), in which they are coerced into informing on their friends, neighbors, and family members to the internment camp authorities for behaviors considered normal elsewhere in the world, such as praying and using a VPN to bypass internet censorship. The other two letters are self-criticism letter, or letter of repentance (悔过书), and letter of guarantee (保证书).

In December 2019, on the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese regime said that all “trainees” (internees) in “Vocational Training Centers” (reeducation internment camps) had “graduated,” meaning that the internees were released. But the reality of the situation was at odds with the official statement, which is often the case in China. Multiple of our Uyghur interviewees said that many internees were sent straight to prisons from the reeducation internment camps. Zenz (2024b) notes that in addition to their reeducation and indoctrination purposes, the reeducation internment camps practically served as the places of preemptive assortment between 2013 and 2019; based on the perceived level of risk, low-risk Uyghurs were sent to (textile) factories and industrial parks as forced laborers, while others such as Uyghur intelligentsia and business elites were arbitrarily given lengthy prison terms. One former internee testified to the fact that after 2019 the newly interned Uyghurs were sent to pretrial detention centers and prisons (Zenz, 2024b, p. 17). The practice of arbitrarily handing out lengthy prison terms to Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples were already happening in 2016/2017 (Bunin, 2020), but in 2019 the number of former internees transferred to prisons and detention centers increased dramatically (Bunin, 2019).

The internment of Uyghurs appeared to have decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to several of our Uyghur interviewees, possibly due to a diversion of resources. In the course of the 3-year COVID-19 pandemic, people couldn’t leave their homes for months on end because of the lockdowns, which resulted in many preventable deaths, especially among the elderly that needed medical attention. When the lockdowns were lifted, there were so many funerals. Mourning ceremonies were held for those died during the lockdowns. On average, there were four or five funerals a day to attend during that time for an ordinary Uyghur, according to one of the Uyghur interviewees who was in East Turkistan at the time.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the government delivered food such as vegetables, meat, and naan to people’s homes — for payment, of course. People could also order food in the local residential group chat on the messaging app WeChat. However, self-employed merchandisers and those daily wage workers (or gig workers) really suffered during the lockdowns, many of whom went hungry, while some received help from their neighbors. Those who didn’t live in residential blocks or lived in relatively low-standard housing also suffered during the lockdowns. If you

couldn't afford to pay for the food, you wouldn't receive any. There was no government-sponsored food program that provided low-income people with free food. Sometimes, government officials would bring for example a bag of flour or rice and a bottle of cooking oil to some Uyghur families and get their pictures taken, a phony gesture with the sole intention of presenting a positive public façade in the news.

The draconian COVID-related travel restrictions began to ease in China in early 2023, and by November of that year, all COVID-era restrictions had been lifted. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the post-COVID developments had been that the visa application process was made easier for the Uyghurs in the diaspora around mid-2023. In the past, in addition to a letter of invitation from East Turkistan, an Uyghur applicant was required to submit a notarized document verifying kinship. However, that requirement has since been removed. Beginning in 2023, it appeared to be the case that an Uyghur applicant only needed a signed letter of invitation from the person they intend to visit, a passport, and a completed application form.

Uyghurs who went to visit East Turkistan would often first transit through Beijing or Shanghai, where their arrivals seemed to be expected. One of our Uyghur interviewees said that she was welcomed by police officers at the immigration and passport control area of Beijing airport, who asked her many questions and also took her pictures. They clearly knew about her arrival. After being briefed on the dos and don'ts concerning East Turkistan, she was allowed to board her connecting flight.

Like any other foreign visitor, she was required to register at the local neighborhood watch unit's office within 24 hours of her arrival. After answering many questions there, she was taken to a propaganda room (in Mandarin: 宣传室), the walls of which were plastered with posters and pictures of Chinese wartime heroes like Dong Cunrui, Lei Feng, and Huang Jiguang. The clerks photographed her with propaganda materials displayed in the background, documenting their efforts to "educate" foreign visitors.

Like many other Uyghurs in the diaspora who visited East Turkistan since 2023, she was contacted by the Department of Public Security (公安厅) for a "chat." The officers had a thick binder full of information about her, including photographs. They explained that they had conducted a thorough background check before issuing her a Chinese visa. She was instructed to report any ideologically "misaligned" Uyghurs who might visit East Turkistan in the future. "A heads-up would be appreciated," they said. Additionally, they asked her to provide information on future Uyghur activist events in her country of residence, including details such as locations, topics, and attendees.

It would not come as a surprise if the number of Uyghur informants in the diaspora has increased since 2023. As described above, the practice of contacting and interrogating Uyghur tourists (with foreign citizenship) in East Turkistan by the Department of Public Security (or National Security

Bureau) is fairly common. During these interrogations, both incentives and threats are used to elicit cooperation. Incentives could be for example money or future hassle-free visits to East Turkistan, while threats could be for example causing trouble to family members that still live in East Turkistan or an outright entry ban in the future. Many Uyghurs have experienced psychological strain in one form or another in recent years when asked for cooperation while visiting East Turkistan.

As mentioned in the introduction, starting in late 2023, citizens from a growing list of countries are granted visa-exempt entry for stays of up to 15 days or more in China. Among the interviewees were four non-Uyghur foreign nationals (hereafter the foreign tourists), who took advantage of the 15-day visa-free policy and traveled to East Turkistan during 2024. Their travel experiences and observations were fairly similar. All of them were tailed by plain clothes police officers (or surveillants) during their travels across East Turkistan. They also experienced unexpected hurdles with their hotel bookings. It appeared to be the case that low-budget hotels couldn't register foreign tourists into the system. In several places, some hotels asked three of the foreign tourists to leave, e.g., in Aksu, Keriye, Khotan, and Kashgar. It might be a policy intended to boost foreign tourist spending by indirectly forcing foreign tourists to stay in expensive hotels.

Figure 2

The red sign on the door reads, “Model family for ethnic unity and progress”



In Ghulja, some Uyghur homes deemed trustworthy were open for tourists to visit. Two of the foreign tourists visited Uyghur houses marked with a red sign on the door, as shown in Figure 2, indicating the household's trustworthiness. They likened this government-initiated arrangement to a zoo and noted that the Uyghur hosts did not appear happy about opening their doors for tourists. One of the Uyghur hosts wanted to share their hardships with one of the foreign tourists, but was afraid to do so as plainclothes officers were monitoring the tourists' every move.

No matter where they went, the foreign tourists were tailed by the surveillants. Almost all the taxis two of the foreign tourists took received a phone call from the public security officer, and they noticed that it was the same number. After the phone call, none of the taxi drivers acted normal. The unspoken message from the police that tailed them was: "We're watching you, and you'd better be careful what you do."

The foreign tourists were not prepared for the stringent security control measures in East Turkistan. A trip to a supermarket required showing their passport. Before taking a train to anywhere, the foreign tourists were subjected to extra security check and waiting time at the train station. There was more police presence at train stations in Keriye, Khotan, and Kashgar than the ones in Ürümqi and Ghulja. Foreign tourists can only visit attractions that are located within the cities. Venturing farther out requires clearance from the police. In other words, you need a permit from the police that you can present to a police officer at a checkpoint between city boundaries. For instance, visiting the town of Upal (乌帕尔镇) required permission. Furthermore, in 2024 there were still checkpoints between cities in East Turkistan, e.g., between Kashgar and Yarkand, and in Cherchen, Keriye, and Khotan.

As part of its efforts to boost tourism and put up a façade, the regime had turned the old town of Kashgar into a Disneyesque theme park, according to the foreign tourists. An entrance fee was levied on tourists, which was also the case for a visit to the famous Id Kah mosque. The observant foreign tourists noticed that no Uyghur woman wore a headscarf, and no Uyghur man grew a beard except for some elderly men. Almost no one attended the Friday prayer at the Id Kah mosque. Uyghurs are generally not allowed to go to mosques. If you insist on entering a mosque as an Uyghur, you need to present your ID card, and soon after the police would come and take you away. Furthermore, one Uyghur interviewee said that some Uyghurs have been tasked with visiting a certain mosque on a regular basis. And if these people failed to do so, they would receive the heat from their superiors: "Why didn't you go to the mosque?"

In the past decade, many old mosques were either destroyed or converted into shops and bars; moreover, culturally significant shrines were also demolished.²¹ One of the Uyghur interviewees, born and raised in Kashgar, also commented on the situation of the mosques in Kashgar: "There

²¹ Buckley, C. & Ramzy, A. (2020, September 25). China Is Erasing Mosques and Precious Shrines in Xinjiang. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/25/world/asia/xinjiang-china-religious-site.html>

were around 65 mosques in the Kashgar old city area circa 2015, and just a few years later the number reduced to fewer than 10, some of which were turned into tourist attractions.” One foreign tourist also said that the ancient bazaar in Kashgar, which was a hustling bustling place full of tradesmen, no longer exists. Another foreign tourist noticed that the daily Uyghur dance sessions at the People’s Park in Kashgar seemed to be organized by the local government for tourists. Some Uyghur civilians were tasked with showing up as audience, while some Uyghur officials would circle around and check whether things were going as intended.

The regime has also actively demolished Uyghur cemeteries, where generations of families were laid to rest. As of late 2019, the number of demolished Uyghur cemeteries since 2014 that journalists and others were able to identify through satellite imagery and on-site examination exceeded well over 100.²² Furthermore, according to the account of one Uyghur interviewee, there had been instances where the buried human remains were relocated to concrete burial vaults that were placed above ground, including the relocation of newly buried bodies. When Chinese authorities started to ban the burial of the dead in some places (e.g., Aksu region) beginning in 2017 and imposed the use of concrete burial vaults instead, there was unbearable stench of decay in the area full of concrete burial vaults that were placed above ground. Traditionally, the deceased would be washed and shrouded and so buried, without a casket. The Uyghur interviewee said, “Slowly but surely, Chinese authorities will mandate cremation in the future as more and more people lodge complaints about the stench.” Cremation of the body is strictly forbidden in the Islamic tradition. The Chinese regime has made it abundantly clear about its intent to de-Islamify Uyghur culture through its abovementioned relentless actions.

The regime has long engaged in a variety of tactics to either constrain the religious freedom of Uyghurs or outright ban religious practices as it has done in recent years. One Uyghur interviewee recounted that back in the fall of 2010, the time of year when Uyghur farmers usually have more free time, local authorities in southern East Turkistan forbade Uyghurs to stay indoors during the day. This control measure was meant to discourage religious observance in private homes and prevent “wrong” ideologies from taking hold. Also beginning in 2010, Chinese authorities (primarily in rural areas of southern East Turkistan) started mandating alcohol-involved social gatherings on Fridays (the holy day of the week for Muslims), where alcoholic drinks and snacks were paid for by the local authorities, and Uyghurs took turns hosting. Moreover, local authorities also provided free alcohol to Uyghur weddings, an outright affront to devout Uyghur Muslims.

In addition to being perceived as a Disneyesque theme park, the old town of Kashgar is also a Potemkin Village. “Everything was fake there,” one foreign tourist (interviewee) recalled. One Uyghur interviewee said that Uyghurs who had lived in the touristic area of the old town for generations were forced to vacate their homes and move into apartments elsewhere provided by the

²² Rivers, M. (2020, January 2). More than 100 Uyghur graveyards demolished by Chinese authorities, satellite images show. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/02/asia/xinjiang-uyghur-graveyards-china-intl-hnk/index.html>

authorities, while Han Chinese with some proficiency in the Uyghur language and culture were made to move into those Uyghur houses. Some aspects of Uyghur culture can only be found in touristic places. For example, tandoor ovens for baking traditional Uyghur naans are now rarely found elsewhere except for touristic places. Some Uyghur ethnic markers shown in Chinese propaganda videos are all but erased in reality, e.g., adobe-style homes with courtyards and distinctive latticework as well as religious architecture.

Furthermore, another Uyghur interviewee said that Uyghur houses in Uyghur-majority touristic areas in for example Ghulja, Khotan, and Kashgar were rented out below market values to Han Chinese, especially to Han Chinese migrants from other provinces, while Uyghurs were forced to move to cheaper housing units on the outskirts of cities, probably with some benefits provided, e.g., electricity and water bills are covered for a period of time. These Uyghurs couldn't resist government demands because the Chinese regime demands absolute loyalty to the CCP (对党绝对忠诚), which is required of only Uyghurs, not Han Chinese. Those who fail to show their absolute loyalty will be punished. For instance, punctual attendance to the flag-raising ceremony is required of Uyghurs. If an Uyghur teacher shows that they care for an Uyghur student, then they can be accused of harboring 'ethnic sentiment' (民族情怀),²³ thereby regarded as disloyal to the CCP. The same goes to Uyghur camp guards who show sympathy for Uyghur internees, for which they would be punished.

The use of Uyghur language among Uyghur children is in serious decline across East Turkistan. All use of the Uyghur language is prohibited across all levels of schooling, including the preschool level. This ban is also applicable to all collective/communal activities and administration work within the educational system. Uyghur children are taught Han Chinese culture in elementary schools, which is of paramount importance in comparison with other school subjects, while Uyghur culture education is completely absent. Both Uyghur and non-Uyghur interviewees commented on the fact that Uyghur children in East Turkistan speak only Mandarin among themselves, and many of them have difficulty communicating with their parents and grandparents in Uyghur. In a rare interaction one local Uyghur told one of the foreign tourists that, "if nothing is done in the near future, the next generation will forget their Uyghur identity and Uyghur culture, they will forget how to speak their native tongue, and they will just be Han Chinese."

The situation did not appear to be getting better when Agence France-Presse reporters visited four Uyghur-majority villages in the county of Yarkand in July 2023, where the internment rates were extremely high at the peak of the regime's mass internment campaign. They, despite being obstructed repeatedly, saw that "many homes were locked, and a few appeared neglected or abandoned."²⁴ The reporters also learned that the internment camps previously identified by

²³ A deep sense of emotional connection, pride, and loyalty toward one's own ethnic group.

²⁴ AFP. (2023, September 8). China's Uyghur villages hide their secrets after Xinjiang crackdown. *Agence France-Presse*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230908-china-s-uyghur-villages-hide-their-secrets-after-xinjiang-crackdown>

researchers continued to operate. “Several had staffed guard towers, security cameras and high walls topped with barbed wire” (AFP, 2023). Furthermore, during their week-long visit to East Turkistan in November 2023, NZZ reporters learned that seven of the internment facilities they were able to visit (despite police obstruction) were still in operation, concluding that: “China may have ended the system of reeducation camps in Xinjiang, but has replaced it with masses of high-security prisons.”²⁵ This post-COVID development was in accord with the Zenz’s (2024b) research mentioned above and the accounts of our Uyghur interviewees.

With regard to the arbitrary internment of Uyghurs in 2024, one of our Uyghur interviewees who fled China in the second half of 2024 said that it is still taking place, which was also confirmed by one of the foreign tourists we interviewed who had a rare open conversation with a taxi driver (in 2024) regarding the reeducation internment camps. When asked about the reeducation camps, the taxi driver said that people were still being sent to internment camps, or repurposed buildings (e.g., previously used as a hospital). The taxi driver also added that he hadn’t been able to contact his friend in Ürümqi for the last 9 months, who was believed to be sent to a reeducation camp.

In the past few years as well as the time period between 2017 and 2019, Uyghurs were arbitrarily detained openly out in the streets and sent to reeducation internment camps. In 2024, the regime appeared to have shifted to a more covert and secretive internment tactic. For instance, Uyghurs would be asked to meet up somewhere such as the local police station through a phone call before being sent to an internment facility; or, the authorities would cut off one’s cell phone service, and when the Uyghur in question goes to inquire about it, they would be detained there and then.

The reasons for internment also changed or expanded to include for example, having criticized other Uyghurs for marrying Han Chinese or for eating Han Chinese food (non-Halal), or engaging in online activities deemed problematic by the regime. The regime also targets those who show signs of disobedience, defiance, or discontent with the authorities. The slightest misstep in the form of an online post or a like given to a post on social media would send an Uyghur to an internment camp. The duration of internment appeared to be significantly reduced to between 8 and 15 days for most people in 2024, while for some it could last months. It appears that the short-term internment has become an accepted norm within Uyghur society, where people are no longer as apprehensive as they were previously, when the duration of internment was unknown.

The intents behind the relaxation of entry into East Turkistan

As mentioned in the introduction, with its visa-free policy the Chinese regime intends to boost its inbound tourism, attract foreign investment, and improve its international reputation. But with respect to East Turkistan, the regime might have more intents concealed beneath the surface. When

²⁵ Sander, M. & Kamp, M. (2024, March 7). Has China really closed its reeducation camps in Xinjiang? NZZ (Neue Zürcher Zeitung). <https://www.nzz.ch/english/secret-security-area-no-photography-allowed-china-has-officially-closed-the-camps-in-xinjiang-and-now-ld.1820729>

asked about the focus of the Chinese regime, Sophie Richardson, a longtime activist and scholar of Chinese politics, told UTJD that:

It's on control and staying in power, and keeping people who are inside or outside the country who want to challenge its policies quiet. Let's be very clear; if the Chinese government really has nothing to hide about the way it is pursuing policies across the Uyghur region, everyone should be able to go and see their family members. Family members should be able to leave. People inside the region should be allowed to educate their children, to worship as they want, to move around freely, but we know that's not the case. I think unless and until the Chinese government is willing to accept that degree of independent life and independent investigation into some of the most serious human rights crimes it has committed in the region, I think every gesture we see, even if it looks like it is being friendly and helpful to the diaspora communities, clearly has a calculated aspect of control baked into it.

First and foremost, the regime's intent is about image repair. Each year the regime expends billions of dollars on its information manipulation efforts (i.e., propaganda and disinformation) beyond its borders, reshaping critical views toward its policies and promoting its geopolitical narratives.²⁶ For instance, one tactic used to strike back at accusations of gross human rights violations in East Turkistan was the firehose of falsehood. In other words, social media were bombarded with voluminous fake posts and hashtags to deny the accusations, with no regard for truth.

Following a decade filled with unprecedented scale of persecution of the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples, accompanied by the subsequent international opprobrium and various sanctions, it may not be a surprise that as a matter of course the regime intends to repair its global image by opening up to international tourists and showing them how normal the everyday life is in East Turkistan. However, the ease of entry into East Turkistan necessitated some preparatory work that involved for example burning or shredding all documents related to the reeducation internment camps (due to multiple instances of leaked files), making former internees keep quiet about their internments, shifting towards more covert operations (while the internment of Uyghurs is still ongoing). The regime has ensured that no one talks about the internment camps in East Turkistan. In an interview with UTJD, Erkin Ekrem, an Associate Professor of History at Hacettepe University, said, "The ease of entry reflects the confidence of the Chinese regime's control over East Turkistan."

Foreign tourists are welcomed and shown the perfect façade hardly indicative of persecution of the Uyghurs. However, as discussed in the previous section, tourists can only get to see places that are

²⁶ Global Engagement Center. (2023, September 28). *How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment*. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/gec-special-report-how-the-peoples-republic-of-china-seeks-to-reshape-the-global-information-environment/>
Volz, D. & Gordon, M. (2023, September 28). China Is Investing Billions in Global Disinformation Campaign, U.S. Says. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-is-investing-billions-in-global-disinformation-campaign-u-s-says-88740b85>

allowed by the authorities; otherwise, a permit is required. And when those with no critical thinking caps on return to their respective countries after having traveled to East Turkistan, they would, as hoped by the regime, tell their friends and families that things are alright and normal in East Turkistan, unlike the picture painted by the Western media. If this turns out to be the case, we can say that all the effort that went into the regime's image-reparation propaganda has paid off.

Secondly, to undermine the Uyghur cause, or Uyghur rights advocacy, on the global stage. We understand that many Uyghurs in the diaspora have made a conscious choice to take advantage of the ease of entry into East Turkistan to visit their families and relatives that they hadn't seen in years. The former internee Zumret Dawut observed that many of them were warmly welcomed by their relatives with flowers in their hands at the Ürümchi airport, as shown in the videos posted on the Chinese TikTok (Douyin), clearly organized by the Chinese authorities. She told us that one or two Han Chinese surveillants (or officials) could be spotted in those videos, which have been used to help the Chinese regime construct a narrative to counteract the accusations of various human rights violations. Therefore, Uyghur activists like Zumret Dawut and Mihrigul Tursun (also a former internee) are critical of those Uyghurs in the diaspora who chose to travel to East Turkistan to meet their families. The regime's narrative is aimed at the international community that Uyghurs are not persecuted, and that they can travel freely to and out of East Turkistan. Mihrigul said that, "Years of hard work in promoting the rights of Uyghurs has been undermined. When the Chinese regime intensifies its persecution of the Uyghurs in the future, the international community will find it difficult to support the Uyghurs."

Thirdly, to survey and surveil the Uyghurs in the diaspora. The likelihood of being contacted by the Department of Public Security for a "chat" is fairly high for those Uyghurs who travel to East Turkistan to meet their families and relatives. As a matter of fact, as discussed earlier in the present report, one of the Uyghur interviewees who traveled to East Turkistan in 2023 was contacted and interrogated by the officers at the Department of Public Security. It appeared to be the case that those officers were interested in the lives of the Uyghurs in the diaspora, particularly in the younger generation. They may have legitimate concerns with respect to young Uyghur activists, who grew up in the West with democratic values and many of whom have received higher education. So maybe the officers should be concerned. Compared to the elder generation, the younger generation is better equipped to promote the rights of the Uyghurs.

Adrian Zenz, a prominent scholar who has researched the Chinese regime's various human rights violations against the Uyghurs, told us in an interview conducted in the second half of 2024 that already in 2017/2018 the regime took keen interest in the Uyghur diaspora, based on some government documents. Particularly, the second generation of Uyghurs might have concerned the regime because they could be anti-China. Zenz noted that the regime was excessively concerned about "terror threats," surveying Uyghur youth in the diaspora from a security perspective. He also said that the ease of entry into East Turkistan resulted from international criticism, and this privilege

to visit families in East Turkistan might have been used as an incentive for those Uyghurs in exile who had been silent and compliant.

The regime's surveillance effort also entails recruiting Uyghur spies. Both incentives and threats are used in the interrogation to elicit cooperation. Zumret believes that those Uyghurs who visited East Turkistan and posted videos about their travels on social media in recent years were tasked with collecting information on other Uyghurs in the diaspora, based on her own personal experience and some accounts of others. After repeatedly scouring the social media for travel videos posted by the Uyghurs, she observed that most of those Uyghurs had traveled from Australia and eight European countries. For propaganda purposes, they were likely asked to upload videos about their travels by for example the neighborhood watch units, the micromanagement units of the Chinese regime. Therefore, those who posted pro-China videos or appeared in pro-China videos were likely forced by the Chinese authorities to do so. Furthermore, the Chinese regime is actively engaged in transnational repression targeting the Uyghurs living abroad, which is facilitated after the ease of entry into East Turkistan as the pool of potential Uyghur informants traveling to East Turkistan has widened, so to speak. The regime monitors Uyghurs overseas, coercing them into compliance or silence. It aims "to prevent the maintenance of Uyghur culture and shape global public opinion on China" (Tobin & Elimä, 2023).

Fourthly, to sow distrust and create rift among the Uyghurs in the diaspora. By contacting and interrogating a significant number of Uyghur tourists — enough to reach a critical mass if you will — who traveled to East Turkistan from the diaspora, the regime has caused an undeniable level of concern among other Uyghurs in the diaspora who chose not to travel there despite the relative ease of entry in recent years. Those in the latter group are likely to distance themselves from the ones in the former as they are acutely aware of the high likelihood of being interrogated and pressured to become an informant while in East Turkistan as an Uyghur tourist. So a rift has been created between these two groups of Uyghurs. Promoting the rights of the Uyghurs requires unity within the diaspora, and the Chinese regime will continue to undermine this unity using various tactics.

Finally, possibly in a broader context, the Chinese regime aims to create a business-friendly environment and transform East Turkistan into a major business hub for South and Central Asia, a viewpoint proposed by Erkin Ekrem during the interview. He stated that the large-scale infrastructure development projects undertaken in recent years, along with the regime's relentless Sinicization of East Turkistan, have been integral to achieving this ambition, which aligns with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Conclusion

The confirmatory and additional accounts from the interviews have shed further light on the multifaceted and evolving nature of the Chinese regime's policies toward East Turkistan. The accounts detail the inception and development of the reeducation internment camp system, the psychological and social toll of mass internment, and the post-COVID shifts in internment tactics.

The early phases of arbitrary detention of Uyghurs beginning in 2013 set the groundwork for the Chinese regime's subsequent mass internment campaign that peaked between 2017 and 2019. The regime's internment drive caused widespread fear, eroded social trust (amongst the Uyghurs), and inflicted lasting trauma on Uyghur communities. While the official narrative declared an end to the reeducation camps in 2019, accounts from the Uyghur interviewees and investigative reporting indicate that high-security prisons have effectively replaced them. And some internment camps have been turned into detention centers. Uyghurs are still being arbitrarily interned in 2024, only in a more covert fashion, though reportedly, the duration of internment has decreased. This reflects a shift in tactics rather than a cessation of internment. Furthermore, the draconian measures during the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of suffering, with strict lockdowns disproportionately affecting vulnerable Uyghur communities.

Despite the superficial normalization of conditions in East Turkistan, the underlying dynamics of control, surveillance, and repression persist. The regime's tactics — ranging from monitoring foreign visitors to coercing Uyghur informants — underscore its intents to maintain tight control over East Turkistan and its narrative. The possibly provisional relaxation of entry into East Turkistan appears to serve multiple strategic purposes for the Chinese regime — to repair its global image, to monitor the Uyghur diaspora, to create rift among the Uyghurs in the diaspora, to undermine international advocacy for the rights of the Uyghurs, and to create a business-friendly environment conducive to transforming East Turkistan into a major business hub of South and Central Asia.

The accounts of our interviewees serve as a critical counter-narrative to the Chinese regime's denials and its attempts at obfuscation. The continued documentation and dissemination of these stories remain essential in holding the regime accountable for the atrocities it had committed and continue to commit. We will continue to advocate for the rights and dignity of the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan.

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