

# The Rise of Global Islamophobia and the Uyghur Genocide

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RUSHAN ABBAS

## INTRODUCTION

THE WORLD IS OBSERVING ONE of the worst humanitarian crises of this century: the Uyghur genocide, a colonial project that uses modern surveillance and widespread concentration camp apparatuses. At the heart of this genocide is a fundamental “otherization” of the Uyghur people that relies on Islamophobic policy and rhetoric to dehumanize the indigenous population of East Turkistan, known to China as Xinjiang. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs Islamophobia to over-police Muslim populations and curtail their civil liberties. Islamophobic rhetoric has also driven surges in hate crimes against Muslim communities. The United Nations notes that this trend continues today as Islamophobic incidents continue to rise globally.<sup>1</sup> The genocide in East Turkistan is the defining human rights atrocity of the twenty-first century thus far. The CCP has remolded a global trend of Islamophobia to fit their own needs—a new chapter in a horrific history. Though the motivations of the Chinese state

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in East Turkistan are varied, economic gain, cultural unification, and national consolidation all rank highly. Specific policies targeting the practice of Islam have allowed for a brutal crackdown on cultural norms in the region. Meanwhile, a global trend toward Islamophobia has given the genocide some political cover in the global sphere.

In China, the CCP wields Islamophobia as a tool of ultra-nationalism to subdue populations viewed as outside the communist project. The outcome has been a genocide in the most definite terms. The separation of families, forced detainment of Uyghur people, and systematic abuse of the population all meet the definition of genocide laid out by the United Nations, with the intent of these collective actions being the erasure of a group based on identity.

## CONFRONTING MODERN GENOCIDE

Genocide is a relatively new term. The twentieth century brought waves of atrocities to the shores of history, demanding a complete reevaluation of how the world governs the behavior of nations and states. Germany's Holocaust, Stalin's gulags, Pol Pot's killing fields, and Rwanda's ethnic cleansing all demanded an international community that could respond swiftly and aggressively to instances of attempted cultural and physical erasure.

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Yet, what system have we arrived at? Is there in place a system that can adequately respond to the genocide of the Uyghurs today? Following the Holocaust, "never again" became the rallying cry. A simple refrain that dictated that humanity should never again tolerate such flagrant destruction of human life. Despite this, following 1945, the world watched as groups were subjugated to the same brutal policies of destruction. There are always excuses for why the response to these events has been inadequate. There was not enough information at the time, there was not strong enough will at the time, or there was not enough time at the time.

Now, at this moment, the world finds itself again at the precipice of a new crime. The situation in East Turkistan has reached crisis levels, escalating into one of the worst atrocities of the current century. The present genocide has been centuries in the making. The land of East Turkistan is a colonized territory seized by the Qing Dynasty before the creation of the People's Republic of China. Since then, policy in the region has ebbed and flowed in regard to control, always with the understanding that the resource-rich territory is critical to long-term Chinese interests. But under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, there has been an escalating construction of surveillance and detainment apparatuses,

as well as increased detentions and disappearances.<sup>2</sup> Leaked documents from the CCP detail the systematic concentration of Uyghurs in camps where they are detained without due process and sequestered in squalid conditions.<sup>3</sup> Birth

rates in the region have been cut almost in half, marking the largest drop in birth rates in recorded UN history.<sup>4</sup> Concurrent reports reveal systematic abuse inside the camps, including torture and sexual violence.<sup>5</sup> The en-

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tire Uyghur population of East Turkistan (some nine million people) is living under an Orwellian surveillance state where the CCP has limited free movement and accelerated observation to criminalize even the most mundane tasks.<sup>6</sup> As part of its genocide, China is engaging in a systematic effort to annihilate symbols of the Muslim faith in East Turkistan. There are fewer mosques in China now than at any time since the Cultural Revolution.<sup>7</sup> This is because mosques are being destroyed—sometimes with bulldozers—in order to make way for ostensibly more acceptable cultural icons, like Hilton hotels.<sup>8</sup>

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Over the past decade, I have dedicated almost all my time to opposing this genocide. I founded the organization “Campaign for Uyghurs” in 2017 when the genocide reached a fever pitch, and it became clear that the Chinese government’s goal was the total extermination of the Uyghur people. The Campaign has worked with international governments, interfaith organizations, and vulnerable groups to empower a response to the genocide. As a Uyghur, the culture of my people is steeped in the Muslim faith, making the war against us a war against Islam.

#### ISLAMOPHOBIA: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON WEAPONIZED IN CHINA

Islamophobia is a global crisis that has driven brutal and discriminatory policies. The worst of this phenomenon is occurring now in East Turkistan in the form of genocide. China’s war on Islam drives the active campaign to dehumanize the Uyghur people. All religion is a pathology to the CCP, but Islam is treated as a unique threat. In fact, it has been called a “mental disease” by the CCP: one that must be adequately treated in order to be eradicated. *The Atlantic* reported that inside concentration camps, prisoners are “forced to renounce

Islam, criticize their own Islamic beliefs and those of fellow inmates, and recite Communist Party propaganda songs for hours each day.”<sup>9</sup> When we observe this discriminatory practice, we recognize that it is at once part of a long-term global trend and a new escalation. In East Turkistan today, we are witnessing the eventual outcome of such hatred. There is no excuse for such hate—whether it is perpetrated by the CCP or by any other government.

It is important to note that Islamophobia has been on the rise for the past few decades. The discourse surrounding mosque construction and veiling laws highlight rhetoric that discriminates against Muslim populations. These events have been driven by a growing *otherization* of Muslims. This trend is often defined by its broad over-generalizations of Muslims and the language of radicalization. Commonly, Islam is conflated with terrorism, and Muslims are viewed at worst as radical by definition, or at best at high risk of radicalization, always through the lens of national security.

For the CCP, this form of prejudice presents an opportunity to build inertia behind a long-held colonialist goal in East Turkistan, building on their existing apparatuses and creating new ones. The growing movement against Islam offered critical cover for China’s true goal: to eradicate the Uyghur people and make way for Chinese expansion. Armed with this new framework, the CCP began its decades-long operation, culminating now in mass internment. The use of shifting overtones related to Islamic populations allowed the CCP to engage in unprecedented curtailing of civil liberties and the most extreme policing tactics in the world.

To effectively engage in this genocide, however, the government was in need of a massive surveillance apparatus. Following the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, surveillance was enacted under the auspices of security, creating a continuing platform to track massive swaths of people. In general, surveillance conceptually targets those viewed as the “other.” In East Turkistan, this has been made patently clear. The sheer amount of surveillance technology is staggering; cameras and facial recognition software line the streets of major cities now. The “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism” has been heralded by the state as a safety measure. This campaign, originating as part of President Xi’s new approach to the territory, aims to address what he views as a terror problem in East Turkistan. It hinges on increased surveillance, enhanced police presence, and a coordinated effort to track and detain enemies of the state. In reality, it is a campaign of discrimination and oppression that is used to subjugate some 13 million Uyghurs to inhumane and illegal observation. Much of this surveillance is recorded into an app designed by the government for use by authorities on

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the ground in East Turkistan. Maya Wang of Human Rights Watch, the organization that was able to reverse-engineer the app, explained that “the Chinese government is monitoring every aspect of people’s lives in Xinjiang, picking out those it mistrusts and subjecting them to extra scrutiny.”<sup>10</sup>

The true offense of this system is its arbitrary application; the crimes that the CCP deems deserving of attention range from the mild to the absurd. Again, Human Rights Watch documents that data derived from the tracking application uses incredibly arbitrary markers to determine who may be a threat. These include smartphone usage, lack of social interaction with neighbors, and frequency of religious practice. The effect is a dragnet system of data collection that allows the CCP to make any Uyghur an enemy, creating false justification for widespread abuse and internment.<sup>11</sup> This is nothing more than a thin façade that obscures the true crime these people have committed: being a Uyghur.

For the last twenty years, the world has deemed it necessary to fight a war against extremism. Often, the argument for the erosion of civil liberties is that these measures are necessary to protect the general population by curbing radicalism. In this way, the world has slowly witnessed a broad depletion of human rights. The path to genocide is not a swift one, nor is it one that comes without warning. Instead, it is one littered with small and large acts of dehumanization. As China watched the world lay out its plans for the treatment of Muslims, it saw that it could reasonably begin to push the boundaries of those plans even further. Now, Islamophobia is not just occurring on a personal basis, or even being simply wielded by politicians. Now, it is driving a systematic cultural erasure. Now, it has become a monster of unspeakable proportions for the Uyghur people.

To grasp the degree of this atrocity, we must examine its reach. The practice of Islam, labeled as a sickness by the CCP, has itself been criminalized.<sup>12</sup> The CCP has done outright what other campaigns fell short of; it has officially recognized Islam as radicalism. Leaked audio from inside the CCP last year reveals that Uyghurs chosen for detention are determined to have contracted an “ideological illness.”<sup>13</sup> Fasting during Ramadan, one of the central tenets of Islam, is considered by the CCP to be a radical belief that contributes to extremism.<sup>14</sup> The growing of beards, abstention from alcohol, and the refusal to consume pork are given likewise designations.

Is this not a war upon Islam? China’s designation should send signals to the world, especially to Islamic nations, that the CCP views their faith and the societies born out of it as less-than. It should send a signal that, in the view of the Chinese state, these are nations of people that prize terror, not faith. The

world is watching in real time a demonstration of that which we swore to never repeat in the twenty-first century, as an entire religion is designated as a threat, undeserving of our most basic respect.

In general, the Chinese state hides behind the defense of sovereignty in these matters. Their control over East Turkistan gives the state, in their estimation, the power to enact any policy. But its abuse does not end at the border; it extends beyond it. As Uyghurs have fled their homeland in search of religious freedom, they have lived in fear of the long reach of the CCP. These nations fear the wrath of China's economic might and rely on it for financial support. Take, for example, the case of Pakistan, whose leader Imran Khan has been conciliatory on the subject of the Uyghur genocide, largely because of heavy Chinese investment in the country.<sup>15</sup> In a broad sense, the result is that nations are willing to sacrifice the safety and well-being of those seeking asylum within their territory.

The Chinese government punishes Uyghurs even for activism outside their borders. My sister was taken into custody by the CCP because of my participation in a panel at the Hudson Institute. The president of the World Uyghur Congress, Dolkun Isa, is one of the most high-profile Uyghurs in the world. Isa's own family has been targeted as the CCP sentenced his brother to life in prison in retaliation for the tribunal's activities.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the CCP uses family members in propaganda efforts, forcing them to read scripts in videos spread internationally that condemn their activist family members. All these abuses weigh heavily on the diaspora and create a culture of fear and anxiety that permeates throughout the community.

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CHINA AS AN IMPERIAL STATE

Around the world, Islamophobia is used as a tool of imperial expansion. Adventurism into the Middle East by various powers was viewed, especially by critics

of their policies, as another experiment in empire. This was true of the European powers in the 18th and 19th centuries, and among some academics remains true of interventions by coalitions today. Yet, when it comes to the government in Beijing, this lens is often ignored. The Uyghurs are, however, precisely this: a

colonized people. The region had fallen in and out of control of Chinese power since the Han empire in the last decades of the BCE period. In 1882, it was officially incorporated under the Qing dynasty as a political province of China. In this period, the name “Xinjiang” was popularized and made official, which means simply “New Territory.” Since then, China has fallen into the same pattern that plagued the world in the previous three centuries, one that defines power as the ability to subjugate territory and cleanse it of the native population. The region of East Turkistan has long been understood as valuable for its mineral deposits but has taken on enhanced importance due to its strategic location as the central pin of a major trade corridor to be created under the Belt and Road Initiative. Now, Islamophobia is being used as a tool to facilitate cultural and physical cleansing, weaponized by the CCP as a means of defining an entire faith as extremist. The genocide cannot be separated from its imperialist origins nor from its Islamophobic machinations.

There has been significant thought in academic circles on the role of China in the twenty-first century and how it may be a post-colonial power. The twentieth century saw within Chinese borders one of the largest poverty alleviation programs in human history. The BBC, using World Bank data, finds that “overall, 745 million fewer people were living in extreme poverty in China than were 30 years ago.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, many saw the CCP as the hope of the new “Chinese Century.” As the world looked for ways to solve the simultaneous crises of climate change, slowing global growth, and resource-driven conflict, the CCP seemed to offer a possible path forward.

Yet, the last ten years have made clear what has been known to those living under the CCP’s rule in their occupied territories for some time. Democratic reforms have been rolled back systematically as President Xi has centralized power within the Politburo and for himself. His rise has signified the end of the reform era in China, triggering a series of brutal crackdowns across Hong Kong, Southern Mongolia, East Turkistan, Tibet, and even mainland China.<sup>18</sup> What has now become clear is that China is not the post-imperialist power that it was once viewed as; instead, China has adopted brutal colonialism reminiscent of eighteenth-century European powers.

Colonialism, referring to the subjugation of a land and its people for predominantly imperial and economic gain, is not a new concept. It was globally present with the rise of empires across the European and Asian continents in early civilizations and became embedded in the mercantilist structures of eighteenth-century powers as well.

The CCP’s interest in East Turkistan falls in line with the goals of previ-

ous colonial goals of exploitation. The history of natural resource extraction in East Turkistan is long, as Judd Kinzley writes: “this effort is only the most recent in more than a century of campaigns undertaken by an assortment of regional actors seeking to bind Xinjiang and all of Central Asia into a single resource production region.”<sup>19</sup> He states that this economic motivation has driven the genocide, writing that “the growing wave of Chinese capital has also helped create stark economic inequalities in Xinjiang.” These gaps are often along ethnic lines, with Uyghurs being denied economic opportunities while the Han Chinese are systematically advantaged.<sup>20</sup>

The CCP has fallen into the same familiar rhythms that drive targeted destruction of ethnic groups in other colonial states. The use of Islamophobic and security-oriented rhetoric to create economic gains for the ruling state is the bedrock of their atrocity. China’s so-called War against Terrorism and its solution to the “Uyghur Problem” are constructs that allow ethnic domination of a region that offers economic power and trade consolidation, a cynical approach to colonialism that rings with the echoes of early exploration. As with the Native populations during European expansion, but this time in the new century, indigenous populations are treated as little more than obstacles to growth.

To this end, what role does Islamophobia play? The conquering of new lands requires the demonization of those who presently occupy them. The process of otherization through fearmongering serves to dehumanize the population in the eyes of the occupying force. Therefore, the securitization process in East Turkistan includes reports of cultural degradation, often in the form of limiting freedom of religious expression. Social credits are reduced, and the chance of internment rises when Uyghurs are found with long beards or veils.<sup>21</sup> The wearing of a hijab is criminalized, as well as the possession of the Quran and even prayer in some instances. The reality on the ground is that these standards are applied arbitrarily in order to be used most effectively against Uyghurs perceived to be a threat. As a result, what we see at play here is a familiar concept reinvigorated and tailored to meet the needs of the CCP. It is an old weapon, cloaked in twenty-first-century technology, that has given rise to this present genocide.

One of the most chilling developments to come out of East Turkistan is the CCP’s full-throated use of its propaganda machine. For years, Uyghurs in the diaspora have had to watch as their families are weaponized against them, appearing on Chinese state-run networks denouncing their activism and accusing them of fabricating details about life in Xinjiang. Only recently has there been a substantial investigation into this pattern. The *New York Times*, in conjunction



with *ProPublica*, conducted an independent review of 3,000 such videos. In them, Uyghurs regurgitate the stance of the CCP, calling reports of a genocide in East Turkistan a fabrication and insisting that this narrative is invented by the West.

Yet, the investigation uncovered a sinister and Orwellian campaign of manipulation. These videos share far too much consistency to be true first-person unfettered narratives. The investigators lay out the basic format of the videos, writing that the dialogue is so strikingly similar that it is virtually impossible to have occurred in independent vacuums. Instead, it appears to be a highly scripted and organized system of propaganda that attempts to use Uyghur voices to validate the violence being done against them.<sup>22</sup> The authors argue it represents one of China's most widespread attempts to influence global opinion.<sup>23</sup>

The CCP has long understood the importance of narrative control, and their repression of narratives surrounding pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong and Tibet provide ample evidence of such manipulation. Without the ability to trust information coming out of Chinese territory, it is as critical as ever to ensure that independent investigations are conducted by inter-governmental bodies. Unfortunately, the CCP continues to reject calls for such an investigation by the UN and routinely denies access to foreign journalists that do not provide favorable coverage.<sup>24</sup>

Instead, the best information we have available to use on life inside East Turkistan comes from those who

have been fortunate enough to escape. The system of re-education they describe focuses on Islam as a prime factor in the securitization of the region. Gulbahar Haitiwaji was lured from France, where she had lived for a decade, by the Chinese Communist Party to return to China. There, she was captured, interrogated, and detained in a re-education facility. She describes the process of re-education as follows:

“I was held in Baijiantan for two years. During that time, everyone around me – the police officers who came to interrogate prisoners, plus the guards, teachers, and tutors – tried to make me believe the massive lie without which China could not have justified its re-education

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project: that Uyghurs are terrorists, and thus that I, Gulbahar, as an Uyghur who had been living in exile in France for 10 years, was a terrorist. Wave after wave of propaganda crashed down upon me, and as the months went by, I began to lose part of my sanity. Bits of my soul shattered and broke off. I will never recover them.”<sup>25</sup>

This is the truth of life within East Turkistan and within the camps. The sanitization of the narrative on social media and through state-owned channels breaks down in the face of true testimony by those who have been personally victimized by the genocidal policies of the regime there.

## CONCLUSION


Samantha Power, in her exploration of the United States’ response to genocide in *A Problem from Hell*, writes that the world has at large failed to put a stop to genocides and ethnic cleansings. She argues that the international community has at times systematically avoided acting, writing that: “The United States did have countless opportunities to mitigate and prevent slaughter. But time and again, decent men and women chose to look away. We have all been bystanders to genocide. The crucial question is why.”<sup>26</sup>

10 Not only is the question of why we become bystanders critical for the Uyghurs’ survival, but it is also critical to the soul of our very humanity. Genocide receives such a specific determination because it is such a specific horror. To destroy a people for their existence is to violate the basic laws of God and man; it is to hate with such fervor as to make hate material, and with it diminish the global human tapestry.

Yet there is time, now, for the world to address the atrocities that it has wrought. The systems built in the twentieth century must either be enforced or revised to be made enforceable. The conventions on genocide provide an excellent framework for understanding why this crime is to be viewed outside the realm of state sovereignty, and why it must be tried in the international courts. It is clear, in all senses, that the Uyghur genocide has met the definitions laid out in these conventions, so now is the time to act. In many ways, the modern political establishment acts with the belief that the period of colonial expansion exists only in memory. But it is alive and well, thriving even, in lands like East Turkistan. We reflect on the atrocities of those times as cruel and vicious acts of aggression and greed and regretfully wish we could roll back the stone, knowing it is not possible. What is possible, however, is to prevent a new stone from rolling today. We can recognize the sins of our past by successfully avoid-

ing their repetition and rejecting a new colonial age.

Since it was the global political establishment that gave rise to the Islamophobic era, it must be the global establishment that corrects course. We can start by demanding the total enforcement of universal human rights. There is still time to step in and declare the Uyghur genocide an intolerable evil. There is time for the international community to say firmly that slave labor will not be tolerated in our supply lines, where Uyghurs are used as the profit motive for their own annihilation. In response, nations should refuse to accept these goods through their ports. The international community can demand an independent investigation by the United Nations and unfettered access for journalists to the region. These investigations have been stymied by Chinese influence in the body, but they have also lacked true international solidarity in their demand. The international community should further impose sanctions on companies furnishing the surveillance technology used to collectively target the Uyghur people and on individuals at the highest levels of this criminality.

These actions would signal an international response to an international crisis. The global surge in Islamophobia has been at best tolerated, and at worst encouraged, by those who spread the gospel of a “rules-based” international order. Once again, we are faced with the decision as to whether we will live up to that goal or allow it to slip away. There must be action now to protect the Uyghurs, for every genocide we fail to stop gives way to the next. The pattern of Islamophobia can be brought to an end now, once the international community demands an unequivocal end to the Uyghur genocide. 

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