

The name Turkistan is of Persian origin. This region, dating back to the 5th century encompasses what is now Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and East Turkistan (also known as Xinjiang). Numerous Turkic states have had control of the East Turkistan region prior to 1877. In 1876 the Manchu-controlled Qing Empire conquered East Turkistan and renamed the region Xinjiang which means “new territory” in Chinese. In 1933, Uyghur and other Turkic people declared independence and established the East Turkistan Republic. Next year, on April 16 1934, KMT overthrew the Republic and controlled it until November 12 1944, when Uyghurs and other Turkic people again declared independence, creating a state lasting till 1949. That year, the PLA invaded East Turkistan and occupied it, pushing it back into “Xinjiang”, as part of the People’s Republic of China with the help of the Soviet Union.

Uyghurs throughout Chinese occupation have been difficult colonial subjects for the Chinese Communist Party to control. The CCP has maintained control over the Han Chinese people by associating their identity with the Chinese Communist Party. They convinced the Chinese people that any criticism of the party was a criticism of their nationality and by extension themselves personally. Uyghurs did not associate themselves with Chinese identity and thereby felt no personal connection to the party. China sees this as a threat to their control of the region.

Uyghur people from 1949 on have had whole villages slaughtered by the Chinese. Their children have been taken and trafficked into inner China. As the Uyghur people became less and less satisfied by their treatment under Chinese rule, demonstrations and violence intensified. Uyghurs took part in the Tiananmen Square protests and have been integral in the fight for democracy in China.



KASHGAR/ Image source: Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

Beginning Autumn 2017, many changes were made to the landscape of East Turkistan. Freedom of movement had become highly restricted after the Urumqi riots in 2009, but eight years later and three years with no news of civil unrest, what came next was extremely brutal and heavy-handed. The CCP turned the entire region into a highly controlled, open-air prison. Facial recognition cameras were put up every six to ten meters pointing in multiple directions. There was nowhere you could go in East Turkistan that was not monitored and recorded. Groups of police officers stood on the sidewalks and demanded that passersby give them their cell phones to scan. In the beginning, it was obvious they were targeting Uyghur males with this treatment. They almost never asked Han people to do this, and I managed to avoid it. I kept my head down and tried to avoid attracting attention. The police were everywhere. People were very frightened. If the police found something they didn't like on your phones such as religious apps or foreign apps or a VPN, they would go to your house a week or two later, and you would disappear. There was nowhere to hide. They spied using every form of technology they had. China used your phone's GPS to track you, all your apps, and they have thousands of employees that keep

track of this information.

I first found out about people disappearing in January 2018 when my friend was taken. She was Uyghur and openly a Christian. I have not seen or heard from her since, but I did receive word that she was released last fall, I now assume that she is in forced labour.

East Turkistan was covered in barbed wire for a year and a half until the UN was granted permission to visit the camps. I was naively hopeful at the time that the UN would do something about this. Over time, I managed to gather information by talking with Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz friends. I began to get a sense of just how many people were missing. I was living in Urumchi, Xinjiang’s capital where everyone was missing someone in their family. People whose families were not from Urumchi were missing at least half of their adult family members. Whole families had their homes demolished and then disappeared. Large sections of the city where Turkic people lived were torn down, some were relocated, but many just went straight to the camps. In their place modern, lifeless buildings replaced the beautiful Turkic architecture. I spoke with a close Uyghur friend and let him read an article from RFA (Radio Free Asia) that stated that up to 3 million people were in camps. He shook his head. He knew so many people that were gone. He looked at me with a deep sadness in his eyes and said, “That’s not true. They don’t take this seriously.”. He believes it is far worse. I have no idea how many people have been swept away, or how many have died. I don’t suppose we’ll ever know if China remains in power.

In this atmosphere of extreme fear, everyone tried very hard to stay out of the camps. They went to indoctrination meetings, flag-raising ceremonies, and posted things on WeChat praising XiJinping. None of it did any good. If they wanted to take you, they took you. They told people they were being arrested for having Muslim things in their house, or because of the one time they went to the mosque when they were eight. It was all random and insane. Nothing was going to stop them from destroying your life if they wanted to.



Image source: REUTERS/Petar Kujundzic

Since leaving, I discovered just how strategically important East Turkistan is to China's economic developmental goals, and by comparison just how useless the people of East Turkistan are to those goals. Like, true colonialists, China views this land and these people in economic terms only. Government officials targeted the most wealthy Uyghurs, putting them in camps, then appropriated their property and bank accounts. They even sought to make money off of the very bodies of these people by sex trafficking them, selling their hair to Americans, and marketing their organs to rich Saudis and organ tourists.

After leaving East Turkistan I was privileged to be able to meet the East Turkistan Government in Exile and learn about their hopes to set up an independent democratic government in East Turkistan. They have currently patterned the set up of their exile government after Tibet's government. It is my hope that the world will recognize their struggle for autonomy, human rights, equality, and independence, and will help establish democracy in East Turkistan by diplomatically recognizing their in-exile government. The

people of East Turkistan wish to be able to live their lives in peace. Most of the world has turned their backs on them for the promise of Chinese money. We need to help them build a better future. East Turkistan is likely another Bangladesh waiting to happen, with a population that dreads CCP control, and yearns for a stable, democratic republic. This would also give India a better neighbour than China

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