

# BALLARD BRIEF

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## The Occupation of the Uyghur People by the Chinese Communist Party

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# Summary

The Uyghurs are a group of ethnic Muslims in China that have recently been invaded by an external government: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Uyghurs inhabit a resource-rich part of China that the CCP desires to control because of China's growing population and large-scale international projects. The stark religious differences between the CCP and Uyghurs have also fueled the conflict. Additionally, the CCP has claimed that the Uyghur people are separatists and terrorists, threatening the CCP. The unforthcoming nature of the CCP has made it difficult for outside observers to understand the extent of the human rights violations in this occupation. However, there is strong evidence that China committed genocide against the Uyghurs, including forced sterilizations, abortions, and executions. These acts of genocide are being committed primarily in an extensive network of internment camps, where China is holding 1–3 million Uyghurs against their will.<sup>1</sup> The

CCP is also actively seeking to erase the Uyghur culture and religion, both in the internment camps and in Uyghur cities. Nonprofit organizations like the Uyghur Human Rights Project are using grassroots lobbying to help pass legislation to end the genocide in China.

## Key Terms

### **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**—

China's mission is to create a modern-day Silk Road. The initiative seeks to connect China and Europe through investments and infrastructure, thereby promoting more regional trade.

### **Chinese Communist Party**—

The governing party of the People's Republic of China.

**Genocide**—The deliberate eradication of a group through mass killing.

**Han**—The predominant ethnic group in China. The Han people make up 92% of the population in China and 19% of the population worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

**Internment Camps**—Referred to by the Chinese as re-education camps. The purpose of the camps was to receive

forced labor from the Uyghurs and replace their Islamic beliefs with Chinese values.

**Summary Execution**—The execution of a person without a trial or due process.

**Uyghur**—A Turkish ethnic group who primarily practices Islam. China recognizes them as an ethnic minority.

**Xinjiang**—Xinjiang is located in northwestern China. The word Xinjiang

translates to “new province.” Xinjiang is commonly referred to as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). However, the Uyghurs do not refer to this land as Xinjiang because they believe the Chinese government is unlawfully occupying it; instead they refer to it as East Turkestan, which was the name of the sovereign Uyghur nation.

## Context

### *Q: Who are the Uyghur people?*

**A:** The Uyghurs are a group of Turkic Muslims in central Asia. An estimated 12 million Uyghurs live in Xinjiang, a province in the northwest part of China. Xinjiang is also home to 9.5 million Han Chinese people; these Han make up about 40% of the people in Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup> They have occupied their homeland for thousands of years and have a unique culture and lifestyle, given their proximity to trade routes

over the centuries.<sup>4</sup> Culturally, the Uyghurs have more in common with neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan than they do with the typical Han Chinese culture.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Kazakh and Uyghur people speak Turkic languages and primarily practice Islam.



***Q: What is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)?***

**A:** The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is an authoritarian regime<sup>6</sup> that espouses Marxist doctrines.<sup>7</sup>The CCP has been China’s predominant governing body since the late 1940s, when Mao Zedong came into power. Mao defined the party’s identity by shifting more power to the government and executing those who opposed him; his actions helped secure the strong governmental power that the CCP holds today as China’s strongest political party. The current leader of the CCP is Xi Jinping; under his direction and with the help of other governing officials, the CCP has overseen the occupation of Xinjiang.<sup>8</sup>

***Q: What is the relationship between the Uyghurs and the CCP?***

**A:** The conflict between the Uyghurs and the Chinese government extends as far back as 1759, when China’s Qing dynasty conquered Xinjiang.<sup>9</sup> In 1933, the

Uyghurs founded the Islamic State of East Turkestan; within less than a year the Chinese government seized this territory—killing some 8,000 Uyghurs in the process.<sup>10</sup> In the 1940s, with the help of the Soviet Union, the Uyghurs founded the Republic of East Turkestan—although it too would be captured by the Chinese just a few years later.<sup>11</sup> 1949 marked what the CCP refers to as “the peaceful liberation of Xinjiang.”<sup>12</sup> This military takeover resulted in the deaths of thousands of Uyghurs.<sup>13</sup> This precedent of the Chinese occupation of Uyghur land has been perpetuated for decades and is ongoing. In 2015, the Chinese government began moving an undetermined number of Uyghurs into internment camps (estimates exceed one million).<sup>14</sup> This movement led to a variety of hardships for the Uyghur people, marking the beginning of a new era of conflict.

***Q: What does the occupation look like in Xinjiang?***

**A:** The genocide is occurring in internment camps in Xinjiang, where forced labor, sterilizations, abortions, killings, and other human rights violations, such as children being separated from their parents, are taking place. The CCP denied the existence of these camps for two years;<sup>15</sup> however, when they were faced with drone and satellite footage of internment camps and prisoner transports,<sup>16</sup> the CCP changed their claim by stating that the camps were for the deradicalization of criminals and terrorists.<sup>17</sup> The CCP's repeated denial, as well as acts of censorship like the removal of academic research on their occupation of Uyghur territory,<sup>18</sup> have made it difficult to understand the full extent of the issue. The Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, a think tank that specializes in foreign policy and geopolitical issues, assembled a team of 50 experts in international law, genocide studies, human rights,

and the Xinjiang region to study the Uyghur genocide. Their research found that the CCP has violated every provision found in the United Nations' (UN) Genocide Convention.<sup>19</sup> In terms of the number of victims detained, as of 2022, the Uyghur conflict is one of the largest ongoing genocides in the world.<sup>20</sup> The data surrounding the amount of Uyghurs who have been killed in the occupation is almost nonexistent due to the CCP's efforts to keep the details of the conflict private.

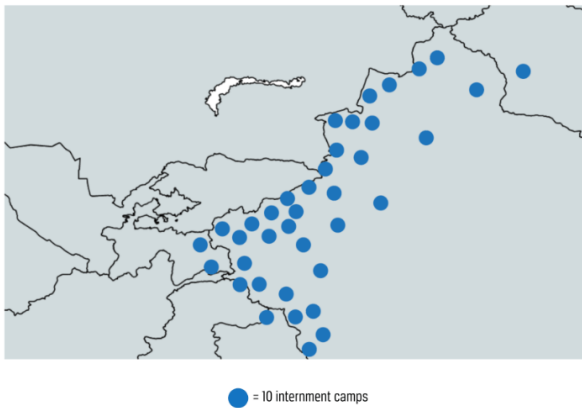
***Q: Where are the conflict and occupation occurring?***

**A:** Dabancheng is one of many areas that the CCP has occupied; it has used military force to occupy and destroy numerous Uyghur cities, such as Kashgar, which was known as the heart of Uyghur culture. The occupation is primarily occurring in the CCP's extensive network of internment camps. Studies conducted with the help of satellite imagery estimate that there are almost 400 different internment camps throughout Xinjiang.<sup>21</sup> As of 2017, one



of the largest camps was reported to be as large as the Xinjiang capital city, Dabancheng. In the following year, the camp was expanded to the extent that it doubled the size of Dabancheng.<sup>22</sup> This camp is said to be able to hold up to 10,000 people.<sup>23, 24</sup>

### Internment Camps Throughout Xinjiang



### *Q: Why is the occupation in East Turkestan different from other occupations?*

**A:** The occupation in East Turkestan differs from other countries because of the acts of genocide being committed against the Uyghur people. Globally, most conflicts are state-based disputes that do not meet the qualifications for genocide.<sup>25</sup> These qualifications include the intentional

dehumanization and systematized killing of a group of people by another group or groups.<sup>26</sup> For example, Turkey has occupied Syria since 2016; while there have been numerous reports of fighting, bombings, and human rights violations, the conflict does not meet the qualifications for genocide. Additionally, the United States occupied Iraq for nearly a decade in the early 2000s. This occupation primarily revolved around counterterrorism; although it involved bombings, intense warfare, and a loss of human life, the occupation is not referred to as genocide.

## Contributing Factors

### *The Desire for Natural Resources*

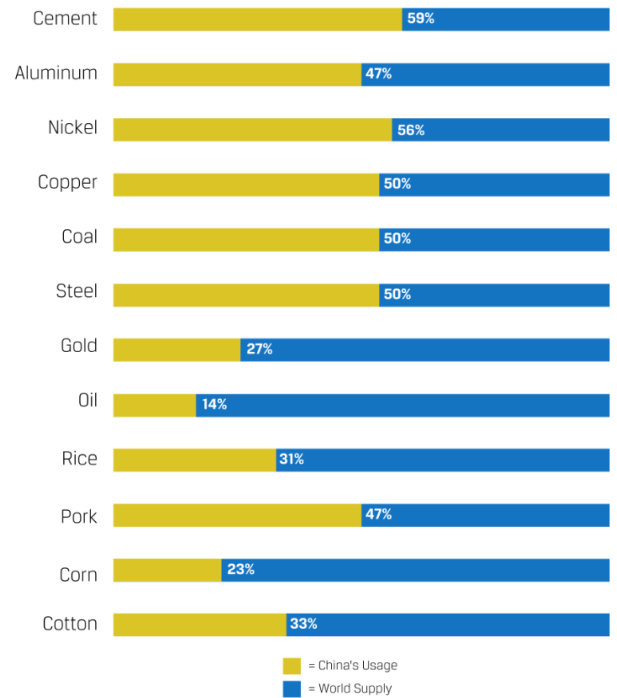
China's occupation of the Uyghur nation is in part motivated by its heavy reliance on the natural resources needed to sustain its population of 1.4 billion people.<sup>27</sup> Of the world's supplies

accumulated in 2016, China consumed 50% of the coal and 14% of the oil.<sup>28</sup> As China's population becomes increasingly urbanized, it is likely that its reliance on natural resources will continue to grow. China is a growing nation with rapidly expanding infrastructural needs. Xinjiang is rich in oil, coal, and other natural resources that are integral to China's growing economy.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to its domestic needs, China has ambitions to link Europe and Asia with a large-scale project called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) Belt and Road Initiative was initially launched in 2013 to link Asia, Europe, and North Africa together through a series of trade routes on both land and sea. The project will include railroads, pipelines, fiber optic cable networks, shipping ports, and other infrastructural installments. The BRI appears to be China's attempt to put itself at the forefront of global trade; the completion of the project would also allow the CCP to achieve maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>30</sup> China requires large amounts of

natural resources like oil and natural gas to continue its growth.

### China's Use of Natural Resources



A researcher at the East Asia Security Center posited that for the CCP, Xinjiang must be controlled—by the use of force if necessary—to ensure that the CCP can achieve its goals surrounding the BRI.<sup>31</sup> The critical importance of the area's cooperation with the BRI has resulted in the CCP meeting the Uyghur's resistance with

force. It has used its military to occupy Uyghur cities and create strict security measures to control the Uyghur people.<sup>32</sup> The large scale of the BRI has motivated the CCP to take bold financial actions to ensure a return on their investment that has also resulted in the use of force.<sup>33</sup> China has borrowed billions of dollars to finance the BRI<sup>34</sup> and has likely invested somewhere between 1 and 8 trillion dollars in total.<sup>35</sup> With the scale of this investment, the CCP has gone to great lengths to ensure that the Uyghurs do not interfere with their operation. The CCP has occupied many cities throughout Xinjiang, limiting Uyghur movement by setting up checkpoints and using technology like facial scanners and smartphone trackers to ensure that the Uyghurs do not escape or defect.<sup>36</sup>

The labor provided by Uyghurs in internment camps has accelerated the CCP's progress on the BRI. Currently, the Uyghurs are being forced to develop the CCP's agricultural, textile, electronic, mining, chemical, and medical industries.<sup>37</sup> The Uyghurs are not only working to develop China's

resources and infrastructure, they are also being used to create goods that China exports to countries around the world. Forced labor provides an economic boost that allows the CCP to more readily fund projects like the BRI.

### *Religious Differences*

The incongruity between the religious ideologies of the CCP and the Uyghur people has pushed the CCP to try and eradicate Islam among the Uyghurs. The CCP espouses atheism as its party's ideology, and consequently, Islam does not fall within its ideological parameters. The CCP has proven that it is both motivated and unafraid to take action against cultural minorities to ensure an atheistic homogeneity in the population. For example, "Document 19" is a document published by the CCP that outlines some of its outlooks on religion. It reads: "We communists are atheists and must unremittingly propagate atheism, and yet at the same time, we must understand that it will be fruitless and extremely harmful to use simple coercion in dealing with people's ideological and spiritual questions, and



this includes religious questions.”<sup>38</sup> Freedom to worship freely is not considered to be a fundamental right by the CCP, and, as noted in its own documents, it does not believe that coercion is enough to promulgate its ideology. As a result of such policies, religious groups like the Uyghurs are not free to worship as they please. Additionally, many people throughout China have been arrested, tortured, and killed because of their religious beliefs.<sup>39</sup> The Uyghurs and the CCP both have deep-seated beliefs regarding religion. The fact that the Uyghurs do not appear to be willing to conform to the CCP’s vision of atheism motivates the CCP to use their power to repress the Uyghurs.”<sup>40</sup>

Historically, the CCP has used different tactics to suppress religious freedom in China. Throughout the 20th century, the CCP forced religious groups such as Taoists, Catholics, and Buddhists into nationally controlled organizations in an attempt to regulate and repress these religious groups.<sup>41</sup> This has been achieved primarily through China’s United Front Work Department—an

organization that works closely with CCP leadership in social, political, and military affairs.<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that some CCP leaders, such as Jiang Zemin, have “looked with approval at the growth of religion.”<sup>43</sup> However, his successor, Xi Jinping, has not supported the growth of religion at all; as previously mentioned, Xi Jinping has been the driving force behind actions such as the creation of “Document 19”. Currently, groups like the Uyghurs are being targeted in a similar fashion, as they have been compelled to join the Chinese Islamic Association.<sup>44</sup> An integral part of the Uyghur’s Islamic faith is the Salat (sacred prayers); mosques broadcast these prayers over loudspeakers five times a day so that Muslims in the area can perform their own prayers. For the CCP, this expression of faith does not align with their atheistic beliefs, so it used the legislative power of the Chinese Islamic Association to ban Salat in Xinjiang.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Perceived Threats***

After initially denying its role in the Uyghur occupation, the CCP pivoted by

labeling the Uyghurs as terrorists, extremists, and separatists.<sup>46</sup> This characterization has led to further maltreatment and acts of genocide in the Uyghur occupation. Changing how a crisis is defined can determine how governments handle situations; additionally, categorizing a group as a terrorist organization can further decrease the likelihood of peace between that group and the government.<sup>47</sup>

The CCP has placed the Uyghurs in internment camps because of the perceived threat of political extremism and terrorism.<sup>48</sup> According to a 2015 report, the CCP estimates that at least 30% of all typical Muslim communities are made up of religious extremists.<sup>49</sup> This is not the first time the CCP has perceived such a threat and taken action. Historically, the CCP has shown a pattern of “re-educating extremist groups” that do not align with CCP values, with a primary example being the CCP’s “re-education through labor” program in the 1950s.<sup>50</sup> This program was used to target political dissidents, alleged criminals, and religious movements like the Falun Gong,<sup>51</sup> a spiritual group that the CCP

branded as an extremist cult.<sup>52</sup> Presently, the CCP is using the internment camps in an attempt to replace traditional Uyghur values with values that resemble those of the CCP.

The CCP’s allegations of terrorism might not be entirely unwarranted; it has attributed numerous terrorist attacks to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a separatist group founded by militant Uyghurs.<sup>53</sup> The United States Department of State also listed the ETIM on its list of foreign terrorist organizations in 2002. Some believe that it did this because, at the time, the United States was working with China on counterterrorism operations in the aftermath of 9/11.<sup>54</sup> However, the state department removed the ETIM from the list in 2020 due to a lack of evidence surrounding the organization’s existence.<sup>55</sup> Due to the somewhat secretive nature of the ETIM, it is difficult to understand the true nature of the organization. Regardless, it would appear that the CCP’s response to the ETIM is disproportionate in scale because the CCP has targeted groups like women, children, and other people who

have no connection to groups like the ETIM.<sup>56</sup> The ETIM is not perceived as the main proponent of separatism, even among those who wish to establish a separate state.<sup>57</sup> There is no singular agenda among the Uyghur people; some desire a separate nation, while others wish to maintain a relationship with China while also preserving cultural solidarity.<sup>58</sup>

## Consequences

### *Genocide*

The Uyghur birthrate and population growth rate have declined rapidly within the last five years as a result of the occupation in Xinjiang.<sup>59</sup> As the birth rate and population of the Uyghur people continue to decline,<sup>60</sup> they face a greater threat of extinction. A 2020 report from Dr. Adrian Zenz, a senior fellow in China studies and anthropologist known for his studies of the Xinjiang internment camps, found that forced sterilization is a common occurrence among Uyghur women, especially those with more than two children.<sup>61</sup> These actions are part of the

CCP's efforts to regulate and eliminate the Uyghur population, as described in a 2019 family-planning budget report from the CCP. The report specifically states that the CCP is seeking to place 524 intrauterine contraceptive devices, as well as forcefully sterilize 14,872 people.<sup>62</sup>



Alongside the current genocide, the Uyghurs have been subjected to torture and summary executions at the hand of the CCP for decades.<sup>63</sup> Many Uyghurs have tried to flee to neighboring countries, only to be sent back. This is because the CCP's diplomatic influence is strong, and it has proven to be very effective in convincing

its neighbors to relinquish the Uyghurs.<sup>64</sup> In 2017, the CCP had the Egyptian government deport a group of Uyghur students seeking asylum.<sup>65</sup> This practice has also been seen in countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Afghanistan.<sup>66</sup> Upon their return, the Uyghurs face severe punishments, including imprisonment, torture, and summary executions.<sup>67</sup>

While there are multiple reports of summary executions and mass killings, the evidence is anecdotal and somewhat inconsistent. This could be because these killings are not systematically carried out by the CCP, or perhaps the CCP has withheld information concerning these events.<sup>68</sup> An example of mass killing within the last decade is the Yarkand massacre of 2014. In this attack, an estimated 1,000–3,000 Uyghurs were killed by CCP security forces.<sup>69</sup> This massacre was part of the CCP's broader occupation of Kashgar, a prominent Uyghur city in Xinjiang.<sup>70</sup> This pattern was established in other cities as well,

resulting in an increased number of Uyghurs being captured and killed.

## ***Internment Camps***

The occupation in Xinjiang has led to the captivity of over one million Uyghurs in internment camps<sup>71</sup>—although some experts estimate the number to be closer to three million.<sup>72</sup> The total Uyghur population is approximately 12 million, meaning that between 8–25% of the population is currently held captive in internment camps.<sup>73</sup> These camps are places in which forced labor, family separation, and sexual assault occur.



## ***Indoctrination***

While the current internment camps in Xinjiang have grown

substantially within the past few years, the CCP's history of "re-education" goes back much further. The "Re-education Through Labor" campaign in 1955 was created to suppress potential political threats embedded in government departments but rapidly expanded to include the general population throughout China. Targeting and capturing dissidents not only served as a punishment for those who opposed the CCP but also served as strong messaging for anyone else considering dissension. Today, the CCP refers to the Uyghur internment camps as centers of "transformation through education."<sup>74</sup> While the label might have changed, the Uyghurs are still being subjected to harsh conditions under the guise of re-education. Uyghurs are forced into CCP indoctrination programs in the internment camps<sup>75</sup> in an attempt to have the Uyghurs align with the ideologies of the CCP—even if it means renouncing their culture and religion.<sup>76</sup> In these camps, the CCP is also actively seeking to replace the traditional Uyghur language with Mandarin Chinese.<sup>77</sup> There are numerous videos

across the internet that depict Uyghurs in internment camps describing the "good conditions of the camps" and the "benevolent nature of the CCP."<sup>78</sup> Outlets like The New York Times believe these videos to be fake—nothing more than attempts by the CCP to convince the outside world that the Uyghur occupation is not as bad as it appears.<sup>79</sup>

### *Cases of Abuse*

Within the internment camps, there have been numerous reports of physical abuse, sexual assault, and even cases of mass rape, with women being disproportionately targeted.<sup>80</sup>

Information surrounding the treatment of the Uyghurs is scarce, mostly because the Uyghurs are not allowed to leave the camps or communicate with the outside world. However, there have been multiple accounts from escaped Uyghurs detailing an organized system of rape and torture.<sup>81</sup> Tursunay Ziawudun—an Uyghur woman who escaped internment—said that while in the camp, Chinese guards would remove Uyghur women from their cells every night to rape them.<sup>82</sup>

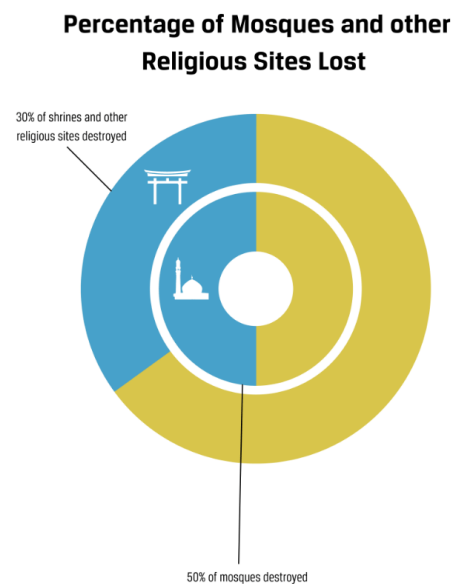
The Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) is a nonpartisan think tank focused on international strategy and policy recommendations. CSIS has conducted extensive research on forced labor among the Uyghurs. Their findings indicate that forced labor is part of a large-scale pattern of human rights abuses that have been perpetrated by governments and large corporations across the globe.<sup>83</sup> The issue requires greater attention because a multitude of entities (both private and governmental) are purchasing goods that are being created by Uyghurs' forced labor. In some cases, these transactions occur because international customers failed to research their supply chains; in other instances, transactions occur because the knowledge of the fact that forced labor was involved was withheld.

The CSIS has found that the CCP believes that forced labor is one of the most effective means by which Uyghurs assimilate into the traditional Chinese culture.<sup>84</sup> The CCP is not simply forcing the Uyghurs to work for capital gains—it is forcing them to work to gain Chinese

values, and for the Uyghurs, the adoption of these new values is not optional.<sup>85</sup>

## ***Destruction of Religion***

The occupation and genocide in Xinjiang have resulted in the destruction of Uyghur religious culture. The CCP has deliberately targeted this part of Uyghur life in an attempt to reinvent the Uyghur people as a whole.<sup>86</sup> Many aspects of this cultural attack are made possible through the use of the internment camps mentioned earlier in this brief; in these camps, the Uyghurs are prevented from worshipping, studying, and speaking as they please.





Research from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)—a think tank focused on foreign policy and strategy—has shown the annihilation of Islamic worshiping places in East Turkestan. The ASPI employed and analyzed satellite imagery to track the destruction of mosques and other religious shrines in East Turkestan. They estimate that approximately 16,000 mosques (more than 65%) have been destroyed by the CCP. Additionally, 30% of sacred Islamic sites, such as shrines, cemeteries, and pilgrimage routes, have been destroyed.<sup>87</sup> The ASPI asserts that this large-scale systematic destruction is a direct result of CCP policy, and it is through this destruction that the Uyghur culture is erased.<sup>88</sup>

Uyghurs are also regularly targeted for their religious beliefs. Numerous reports have shown that Uyghurs have been detained for years simply for speaking Arabic, worshiping at a mosque, or even growing a long beard.<sup>89</sup> Upon their detainment, the Uyghurs are prevented from practicing Islam—facing severe punishments for even speaking about their religious practices. Additionally,

Uyghur children are frequently separated from parents who are detained.

The CCP typically sends these children to orphanages and boarding schools where they, like their parents, are subjected to ideological coercion.<sup>90</sup> The goal of these actions is to replace the traditional Uyghur views with Han Chinese values, thereby eradicating the Uyghur way of life.<sup>91</sup>

The destruction of Uyghur religious sites and the deliberate prevention of Uyghur worship in the internment camps prove that the CCP is both motivated and unafraid to take action against cultural minorities to ensure an atheistic homogeneity.

## Practices

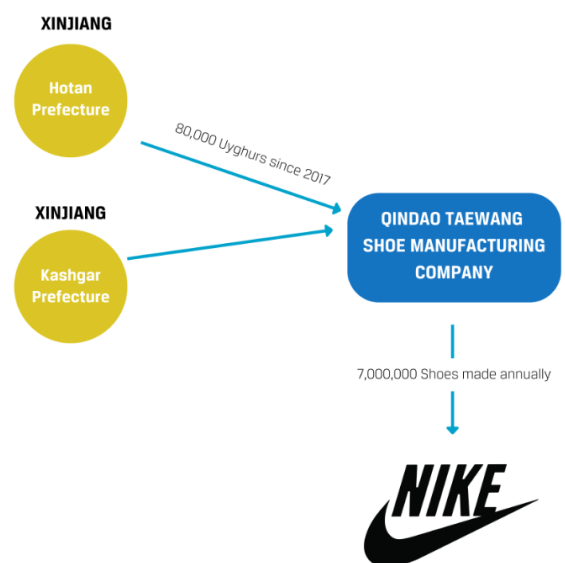
The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) is a nonprofit organization that raises awareness about the Uyghurs through direct advocacy, grassroots lobbying, and event planning with other social problem-solving organizations.

The UHRP was founded in 2003 by Omar Kanat and Nury Turkel. These two Uyghur men have both been personally affected by the occupation, and both share a personal mission to end the conflict in Xinjiang. Kanat has followed the Uyghur conflict for decades—first as a journalist and now as the founder and executive director of the UHRP. Turkel was born in an internment camp but later fled to the United States, where he became the first US-educated Uyghur-American lawyer.<sup>92</sup> Turkel currently serves as the chair of the board of directors for the UHRP.<sup>93</sup>

The UHRP’s mission is to promote the rights of the Uyghurs and other minority groups in Xinjiang.<sup>94</sup> It publishes relevant literature on the occupation while also submitting policy recommendations to the United States government, the United Nations, and the European Union.<sup>95</sup> One prominent piece of legislation that was codified into United States law is HR 6256—also known as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. This law imposes strong importation limits on goods produced by the Uyghurs in captivity. Companies

such as Nike and Coca-Cola—who have historically used Uyghur labor to manufacture their products—are now facing severe sanctions under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.<sup>96</sup> These companies (among others) take advantage of the 80,000 Uyghur workers who have been forcibly removed from their homes by the CCP since 2017.<sup>97</sup> These Uyghurs work for Chinese companies that provide goods for businesses like Nike. The UHRP is able to target these harmful supply chains by passing legislation like HR 6256 because of its robust grassroots lobbying efforts.

## Flow of Forced Labor





Grassroots lobbying is the mass mobilization of the public to pass a particular piece of legislation. Organizations typically employ grassroots lobbying when their social problem is political in nature or when the solution requires legislation.<sup>98</sup> In the case of the Uyghurs, the CCP is primarily responsible for the negative consequences outlined in this paper. Influencing an entity such as the CCP requires strong political power; social problem-solving organizations access this power through grassroots lobbying. When the public voices its shared opinion on an issue such as the Uyghur occupation, legislators are more likely to pass bills like HR 6256.<sup>99</sup>

While the UHRP places a deliberate emphasis on passing specific pieces of

legislation in the United States, it also focuses on a global response to the Uyghur occupation. In 2021, 43 countries at the UN Third Committee “called for ‘immediate, meaningful and unfettered access’ for independent observers, welcomed the High Commissioner’s ongoing assessment of the situation in the Uyghur region, and encouraged the findings to be made public “as soon as possible.”<sup>100</sup> This is one of many examples of the UHRP working in tandem with organizations such as the UN to unite the world to end the Uyghur occupation. Measuring the impact of grassroots lobbying within the context of genocide is difficult because of the lack of precedence; there have not been many grassroots movements that have claimed to stop genocide through lobbying. Although organizations like the UHRP have invested their resources into passing legislation, the extent to which this legislation has affected the negative consequences is inconclusive at best.

# Endnotes

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