



The Fifth Poison: the Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas



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Executive Summary

This report seeks to document the various methods the Chinese government employs to monitor and harass Uyghurs overseas. Uyghurs are subjected to coercion from the Chinese government even after leaving China. The targets of this coercion are not limited to the politically active, but also the Uyghur diaspora more broadly, creating a climate of fear even in liberal democracies in the West.

Although one of the primary goals of the Chinese government's harassment of Uyghurs abroad is to discourage and disrupt political activism among them, it also effects the community more broadly as the Chinese security services seek to recruit members of the community to carry out espionage against others, replicating the system of control that exists in their homeland. Threatening retaliation against family members who remain within the borders of China is one of their primary tools. Not only are members of the Uyghur community overseas faced with the possibility of never being able to see or speak to their family members again, but they are also running the risk of their family being targeted for their non-cooperation. This targeting includes everything from their family members being prevented from leaving China by being denied passports, to putting their jobs and educations at risk, to being subjected to imprisonment.

Technological development has opened a new front in the Chinese authorities' struggle against Uyghur dissidents. Email and the internet have created new opportunities to monitor the activities of Uyghur activists, who find themselves frequently targeted by attempts to gain access to their communications, many of which contain sensitive information. This makes communicating with Uyghurs still in China very risky, as phone calls can be monitored more easily than in the past.

China has long targeted dissidents abroad, seeking to control the narrative of Chinese politics within Chinese communities overseas through tools such as the education departments of their embassies and consulates, for example using them to disrupt events held by activists on college campuses and elsewhere. They have also tried to influence and put pressure on foreign governments to label Uyghurs as "terrorists" and to prevent their free movement, even after they have become citizens of other countries.

Uyghurs find themselves subjected to monitoring and harassment by the Chinese security services even after they leave China. Countries China has built closer security relationships with, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have used their own security forces to attempt to shut down political activities among Uyghurs in their nations, or even detain and deport Uyghurs living legally in their territory.

These tactics undermine Uyghurs' ability to enjoy their legal rights even in Western nations, as well as countries in Central Asia which have closer security cooperation with China. Fear that their families back home could suffer for their political opinions or activities creates an atmosphere of insecurity that can make Uyghurs living abroad reluctant to speak up about their experiences or the general situation in East Turkestan. This has a negative impact on the outside world's knowledge of the region, undermining efforts to improve the human rights situation there.

Background

The Chinese government expends a great deal of effort on monitoring the activities of its citizens within its borders. The measures it takes to monitor and control the internet are well documented, leaving it at last place among countries surveyed on Freedom House's annual Freedom on the Net report.¹ Also well known is the government's harassment and monitoring of dissidents within its borders;² the authorities' efforts at control are strongest in the majority-minority regions of East Turkestan and Tibet.³ However, the Chinese government's control and monitoring of the activities of their citizens or former citizens do not stop at the Chinese border. The large Uyghur population in Central Asia concerns Beijing,⁴ and as the numbers of Uyghurs living abroad in the West grows, so do the Chinese government's efforts to keep tabs on them and to deter them from activities that they perceive as possibly threatening to their rule over East Turkestan.

Although the Chinese authorities take a particular interest in them, Uyghurs are not the only group of Chinese nationals and former nationals who are subjected to surveillance and harassment by the Chinese government overseas. The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has maintained an interest in influencing and observing the members of overseas Chinese communities since it took power. This interest has always been closely linked to fears of separatism and opposition to the government; the Chinese intelligence services are "relatively less risk averse" when engaging Chinese diaspora communities with the aim of combating Taiwanese influence and the perceived threat of the "Three Evil Forces," of separatism, terrorism and religious extremism, says Nigel Inkster, former Director for Operations and Intelligence of MI6.⁵

In the early decades of the PRC the objective of its influence operations overseas was winning the battle for legitimacy among overseas Chinese and opposing Taiwan's de facto separation from the mainland. This work fell to the United Front Work Department and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, under the authority of the State Council, tasked with carrying out *qiaowu*, or "overseas Chinese affairs work." After the PRC replaced the Republic of China in the United Nations, undermining advocacy of Taiwanese independence became the primary goal of Taiwan-related *qiaowu* activity.

During the decades under Mao, China was largely inwardly focused, but after reform and opening overseas Chinese communities in the West expanded rapidly and diversified. Chinese nationals began both sojourning for short periods as businessmen or students and emigrating in large numbers.⁶ However, the catalyst for the expansion of the authorities' efforts to influence and monitor them was the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the large number of dissident exiles it produced. The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office is an overt means of doing this, and according to scholar James To, the CCP has "successfully unified cooperative groups for its own interests, while seeking to prevent hostile ones from eroding its grip on power."⁷

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has its own Overseas Chinese Affairs Office focused on Central Asia, including its Uyghur population. Elena Barabantseva describes its official language as "emphasizing [their] negative relation to China," connecting them to potential separatist forces.⁸ "Unlike its practices toward Han overseas Chinese, which

stress mutual ‘blood ties,’ culture, values, interests and patriotism,” the Chinese government’s engagement with overseas Uyghurs is based “on the assumption that they might otherwise pose a threat to Chinese security,” especially in the wake of Central Asian nations gaining independence from the Soviet Union.⁹ It was also during the post-1989 period that there began to be significant numbers of Uyghurs living in the West, beyond Central Asia and Turkey where overseas Uyghur communities were previously concentrated. As one of the potentially hostile groups mentioned above, these communities became objects of suspicion to the Chinese government.

In the words of the German Ministry of the Interior:

A substantial part of the spying activities in Germany is directed against efforts that – in the eyes of the Chinese government – jeopardise the Communist Party's monopoly on power and China's national unity. This includes the ethnic minorities of the Uighurs and Tibetans, the Falun Gong movement, the democracy movement and proponents of sovereignty for Taiwan. These groups and organisations are defamed by the Chinese authorities as the ‘Five Poisons.’¹⁰

Official Chinese rhetoric about overseas Uyghurs is full of accusations of conspiracies on which any tensions and issues in East Turkestan can be blamed; the activities of Uyghur reporters and human rights advocates are characterized as “terrorist” without credible evidence to support such claims, according to the US State Department.¹¹ Their goal in infiltrating the Uyghur community overseas is not simply to gather information about their activities, but to intimidate them into silence. Gentle methods of influence like those of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office are of no use against groups resistant to the Chinese government. In these cases, says James To, the “CCP authorities resort to direct interference by harassing, blacklisting or attacking hostile elements. Such work goes beyond the scope of the *qiaowu* administration, and is implemented through other government agencies such as the MFA and the Ministry of State Security (MSS).”¹²

Because espionage work is inherently obscure it is not always clear which department is conducting the work of monitoring the Uyghur community overseas. The MSS is China’s principle civilian intelligence agency, carrying out intelligence gathering both overseas and domestically, especially concerning “security cases and issues ‘linked to foreign factors’ or ‘foreign organizations,’ including those operating inside China, or those trying to enter China.”¹³ However, it is likely not the only ministry responsible for monitoring of Uyghurs abroad. Although the Ministry of Public Security’s (MPS) area of responsibility is primarily domestic policing, through its Domestic Security Protection departments it plays a “major role in policing political dissent, ethnic separatism, unapproved religious activities, and espionage... domestic security departments are also responsible for much of the police’s secret investigation work, as well as some of the public security system’s overseas investigation work (called ‘investigation and research outside the border,’ or *jingwai diaoyan* (境外调研)).”¹⁴ This accords with the experience of Uyghurs who have been pressured to report on other members of the overseas Uyghur community who describe being contacted over the phone by individuals identifying

themselves as MPS agents or being required to meet with MPS agents when returning to visit East Turkestan.

This report will focus on cases of harassment and monitoring of Uyghur communities in the West, including North America, Europe, and Australia as well as Turkey, Central Asia and Pakistan's small Uyghur community. It will examine the main tactics used by the Chinese authorities to harass and intimidate overseas Uyghur communities, including widespread efforts to recruit members of the community as informants to report on other members, using the threat of retaliation against their family members still in East Turkestan, attempts to intimidate reporters and activists, and spying on and using cyber-attacks to disrupt their online communications. This report will utilize interviews with individuals who have experienced this kind of harassment, as well as cases that are already known to the public via media reports.

Monitoring of Overseas Uyghurs and Recruitment for Espionage

Considering the ethnic separatism activities outside of the border, carry out all necessary dialogue and struggle. Strengthen the investigation and study outside of the border. Collect the information on related development directions of events, and be especially vigilant against and prevent, by all means, the outside separatist forces from making the so-called ‘Eastern Turkistan’ problem international. Divide the outside separatist forces, win over most of them and alienate the remaining small number and fight against them. Establish home bases in the regions or cities with high Chinese and overseas Chinese populations. Develop several types of propaganda. Make broad and deep friends and limit the separatist activities to the highest degree.¹⁵

So reads a leaked 1996 document from the Central Committee on a meeting chaired by Jiang Zemin regarding “the task of defending the stability of Xinjiang.” Though it is referring largely to the Uyghur communities in Central Asia, it does illustrate that the CCP’s tactic of infiltrating overseas Uyghur groups is a longstanding one, and is part of its overall strategy to maintain stability in the region.

This strategy has long been used by the Chinese authorities against not only the Uyghur diaspora but also against the Chinese dissident community more broadly. The government of the United States openly acknowledges “Chinese operatives and consular officials are actively engaged in the surveillance and harassment of dissidents on U.S. soil.”¹⁶ The defection in 1990 of Xu Lin, a Chinese diplomat in the Washington, D.C. embassy’s education section, revealed some of the targets and techniques employed by the Chinese authorities in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre. The MSS and MPS used the embassy’s education departments to monitor Chinese nationals abroad for democratic sympathies, and recruit others to monitor their peers.¹⁷ The authorities pressured Chinese nationals abroad not to express any pro-democratic sympathies by threatening their job prospects and the safety of their relatives back home in China, as well as their access to passports.

Given the opacity of intelligence operations in general, and China’s system in particular, it can be difficult to discern where a Chinese embassy’s mission to influence Chinese groups abroad ends and targeted recruitment for espionage begins. Peter Mattis, an expert on the Chinese intelligence services, states that “it is possible, if not probable, that Chinese intelligence recruited agents in ethnic Chinese overseas communities, Chinese ethnic minorities, and Taiwanese, but U.S. and other local counterintelligence services did not focus on such activities. In democracies, such activities may not even necessarily break the law.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, there have been a several cases in Europe involving individuals being recruited to spy on the Uyghur community that have resulted in prosecutions, as well as reports of attempts being made to recruit them that have appeared in the media in North America.¹⁹

The Uyghur community within China is well acquainted with the authorities encouraging them to report on one another in order to monitor the political and religious attitudes of

its members. This pressure continues overseas, as the Chinese authorities can use threats against the family members remaining within Chinese borders to coerce Uyghurs overseas to report on the activities of the diaspora.

The authorities' attempts to recruit informers do not always involve direct contact. One example of this is the experience of Parhat Yasin, a Uyghur who has lived in the United States since the late nineties. In 2004, he received several phone calls from Public Security Bureau (PSB) officers in his hometown of Ghulja. One caller identified himself as the head of Ghulja's PSB, and others later called and, using the Uyghur language, told him that they would give his wife and children passports in exchange for him passing information to the PSB about the identities and activities of other Uyghurs he knew.²⁰

Most Chinese attempts to recruit informers do not take place entirely on foreign soil, but involve a direct link to China whether over the phone, or as in the case of Canadian citizen Erkin Kurban, take place inside China. Kurban is unusual in his willingness to speak to Canadian authorities and the media about his experience, as most Uyghurs fear reprisals to their family members within China. In an interview with UHRP, Kurban said that his experience began with an attempt to get a visa in 2013 to return to East Turkestan to visit his elderly mother.²¹ He had been denied a Chinese visa in previous attempts, but on this occasion MPS officials visited his brother in Urumqi and told him that Kurban would be granted a visa if he agreed to cooperate. Upon hearing this message from his brother Kurban reapplied and was given a visa.

Before he left, he told Canadian authorities of his plans, fearing the possibility that he might be detained. Three days after his arrival in Urumchi he was interrogated for 10 hours at the MPS office. Four Chinese officials who spoke fluent Uyghur questioned him. Despite having agreed to help them, they were threatening, saying that his Canadian citizenship would not protect him. He avoided giving any accurate or useful information to them, but said that they already seemed very well informed about the Uyghur community in Canada. He was questioned several more times before he left. When he returned he immediately shared his story with the press and the Canadian authorities. He said that this tactic is used to intimidate the Uyghur community, and that it has been quite successful. Many Uyghurs are suspicious of each other, especially those who are able to travel easily and frequently back and forth between Canada and China, Kurban told UHRP.²²

Kayum Masimov, a former president of the Uyghur Canadian Society, told UHRP that this type of pressure on the Uyghur community has worsened over the past decade, and the level of fear in the Uyghur community in Canada has increased.²³ He said that the cases he is aware of are like that of Erkin Kurban- Uyghurs returning home to visit their families are called into the local police stations to "have tea" and asked about their activities and acquaintances in Canada. The security officials often already knew a considerable amount during these interviews, including where Uyghurs in Canada lived and where they were employed. There have not been any public cases in Canada of Uyghurs drawing the attention of the authorities for espionage activities, although an individual was ordered deported from the country in 2008 for espionage against Inner Mongolian activists, albeit conducted in Mongolia and the United States.²⁴

Europe has had a number of publicly reported cases of Uyghurs as a target for Chinese espionage. In 2011, the General Intelligence and Security Service of the Netherlands reported that the Chinese authorities take an interest in ethnic minorities overseas and that “Uyghurs, in particular, are tightly monitored and even put under pressure to collect information about other members of their community. Chinese agents have attempted to infiltrate Uyghur organisations in the Netherlands, and China has very detailed knowledge of their internal affairs. The purpose of these activities is to maintain a grip on the community, preventing it from organizing effectively.”²⁵

In the view of many Uyghur activists in Europe this strategy is quite widespread and effective in both allowing the Chinese government to maintain knowledge of the Uyghur community and to dissuading many Uyghurs from participating in any political activities and even simply maintaining contact with others in the Uyghur diaspora community. In an interview with UHRP, Enver Tohti, an ethnic Uyghur activist who resides in London, said that several Uyghurs have openly told him that they are reporting to the Chinese government. They told him they felt it was necessary to do so, but wanted to warn him not to say anything to them that he would not wish the Chinese government to know.²⁶ He was told that the authorities use the family members of the people they target for recruitment. Those who have agreed to cooperate meet their family members, along with a Chinese agent, in third countries such as Thailand and Malaysia.²⁷

A 2009 case involving a Uyghur in Sweden demonstrated the Chinese government is becoming more confident in its intelligence activities abroad. Peter Mattis notes that before this case was uncovered “no exposed Chinese espionage case occurred without operational activity inside China —that is, no operation occurred without a physical connection to China.”²⁸ Naturalized Swedish citizen Barbur Mehsut was arrested on charges relating to “unlawful acquisition and distribution of information relating to individuals for the benefit of a foreign power,” for which he received monetary compensation as well as a visa for his daughter and a job for his wife; he was eventually sentenced to sixteen months in jail.²⁹ Mehsut had attended meetings of the World Uyghur Congress, including ones held outside of Sweden such as the third General Assembly of the World Uyghur Congress in May 2009 in Washington D.C. The WUC did not suspect him as a possible spy. He passed information on the activities, health, and finances of Uyghur activists in Sweden, Norway, Germany and the U.S. to Zhou Lulu, a press officer at the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm and People’s Daily Sweden correspondent Lei Da.³⁰ The two were expelled from Sweden after the case came to light; China expelled a Swedish diplomat in retaliation. Sweden’s Security Service (Säpo) built their case through wiretaps and surveillance of their meetings.



Säpo Surveillance photo of a meeting between Mesuht and his contact from the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm © Säpo

A particularly high priority for the Chinese agent was the case of Adil Hakim, one of the Uyghurs formerly held at Guantanamo who was in the process of applying for asylum in Sweden at the time. In her capacity as press officer, Zhou Lulu had argued for Sweden to hand Hakim over to China.³¹ China was concerned that if his case was approved a precedent would be set for more Uyghurs to settle in Sweden as asylum seekers, Mehsut told police. Despite the fact that the case was public, China was anxious to get information directly from the source. Mehsut frequently called him asking for the details of his ongoing case, Hakim told a Swedish radio program.³² Mehsut was even among those who met him at the airport upon his arrival in Sweden from Albania; he advised Hakim not to speak to the press and not to answer any of their questions about China. Many details of the case remain classified for the sake of Swedish-Chinese relations.

The Swedish authorities take what they call ‘refugee espionage’ seriously; the Security Service’s website describes it as unlawful intelligence activity and political persecution, warning that it may “undermine the democratic process, and lead to a situation where people who have sought asylum in our country may no longer feel able to enjoy their constitutional rights and freedoms.”³³ The case of a suspect arrested in February 2017 on suspicions of spying on the Tibetan community suggests that the Chinese security services continue to use these tactics even in countries where they have been caught before.³⁴

Dilshat Raxit, Sweden-based spokesman for the World Uyghur Congress, says that the problem continues to be widespread in Sweden, with four or five Uyghurs in the past three years having told him that they had been approached by officials from the

Chinese embassy and been pressured to spy.³⁵ He believes their methods have become subtler and more effective since the Mehsut case was revealed. They usually target students or those in Sweden on work visas. They seek information on the activities of the Uyghur diaspora in Sweden, and tell them that by cooperating they will receive the embassy's assistance as they study or work there; if they refuse, they have their passports confiscated because of "technical problems" and are forced to return to China. Two people he knows of told the Swedish police about the Chinese embassy approaching them and sought asylum, although they were reluctant to do so. Because of this many Uyghurs in Sweden for work or study avoid having any contact with those in the diaspora, according to Raxit. Surprisingly it is not only Uyghurs who are subjected to this kind of pressure; Raxit said he was aware of a case of an ethnic Han from Urumqi staying in Sweden on a work visa who was brought into the embassy and pressured to spy on the Uyghur community.³⁶

Another Uyghur resident in Sweden told UHRP that his parents had been called into a local police station and shown detailed knowledge of his activities abroad, including travels to different countries in Europe.³⁷ His father was asked to convince his son to stop his activities, and was told to go to Sweden to do so in person. His application for a visa was turned down by the Swedish embassy in Beijing, who had been informed of the situation. The Uyghur Swedish citizen was also aware of others who had been called into police stations when visiting home and shown surveillance photos of themselves before being asked to report on the health, income, and activities of Uyghur political activists. Chinese visas and other incentives are provided to those who agree to cooperate. The interviewee said that in his opinion the Chinese embassy gives and denies visas to Uyghur foreign nationals randomly: "In this way, you can divide the Uyghur society and create suspicions against each other as he may work for China's behalf."³⁸

One Uyghur asylum seeker in Sweden in an interview with UHRP in 2011 described his experience of the authorities attempting to recruit him as an informer.³⁹ He was not granted a passport until he agreed with the secret police to inform on the Swedish Uyghur community, suggesting that it remains an important target for the authorities. After not reporting to the Chinese embassy in Stockholm, his family in China received a visit from the local authorities enquiring after his whereabouts, and he continued to receive weekly emails asking him for information on the Swedish Uyghur community. Another asylum seeker in Sweden told the Swedish media that her family had been visited by the authorities in East Turkestan who told them to try to convince her to come back, and that she would be charged with separatism and revealing state secrets, but that her punishment would be milder if she agreed to cooperate and report on other Uyghurs in Sweden.⁴⁰

The same year as the Swedish case was made public, Germany uncovered a case of a Uyghur passing information about the diaspora to Chinese consulate staff in Munich. As the location of the headquarters of the World Uyghur Congress, as well as home to a large population of Uyghurs, it is a prime location to conduct espionage. The initial investigation led to the arrest of four suspects, all Chinese nationals, their identities protected under German law.⁴¹ One of the accused was not a Uyghur, although he had

previously worked as a teacher in East Turkestan. The officer of the Chinese embassy who handled him was initially the head of the cultural department, later promoted to General Consul.⁴² Three were charged in 2011 and given suspended sentences.⁴³



The Chinese Consulate in Munich © Der Spiegel

Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) was aware of Chinese efforts to monitor Uyghur activities on German soil before this incident. Both the BfV and its regional Bavarian office have published letters confirming Chinese authorities' interest in monitoring Uyghurs on German soil, including those not involved in political activism since the 1990s.⁴⁴ In 2007, a Chinese diplomat in Munich, Ji Wumin, left the country before he could be expelled after being observed meeting with individuals passing information on the city's Uyghur community numerous times. The Chinese government attempted to reassign him to the post several years later, but the German government blocked the move.⁴⁵

The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) of the Netherlands in its 2011 annual report stated that there was evidence that the Uyghur community in the Netherlands was being monitored by the Chinese government and targeted for recruitment for espionage, but the report did not detail how the AIVD came to that conclusion.⁴⁶ The next year two Uyghur translators were removed from their positions at the Immigration and Naturalization Service based on an AIVD report stating that they were reporting to the Chinese authorities. The cases they had been involved in were reinvestigated and a hold on deporting Uyghurs was implemented.⁴⁷ The interpreters filed a complaint with the Monitoring Committee of the Dutch Intelligence Service (CTIVD), which found that the AIVD's report lacked sufficient evidence that state secrets were passed.⁴⁸ The AIVD withdrew the report.⁴⁹

The AIVD has reported other instances of individuals passing information on dissidents to the Chinese embassy in the Netherlands. In 2008, a Beijing-born Chinese national working at the Xinhua bureau requested asylum but was ultimately denied due to the immigration officer finding his claim of fearing the Chinese authorities implausible.⁵⁰ The case featured an AIVD report stating that he had been giving information on the activities of the Falun Gong, Taiwanese, Tibetans and Uyghurs to the Chinese consul Sun Weidong. The individual claimed that only public information was given to the consul, and that his good relations with him were based only on the fact that they were from the same region. While perhaps not meeting the standard of formal espionage, the case fits into the pattern of Chinese state media journalists collecting information on dissidents.

The Australian government has also expressed concerns about the monitoring of Uyghurs on Australian soil. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade stated in 2006: “It is likely that Chinese authorities seek to monitor Uighur groups in Australia and obtain information on their membership and supporters. In pursuing information, Chinese authorities would not necessarily exclude sources who do not have a political profile.”⁵¹

Many asylum seekers in Australia cite their fear that there are informers who monitor the activities of Uyghurs abroad and report on attendance at Uyghur gatherings or political events, and fear their families will suffer repercussions. Some report that their families are repeatedly called in by the police in China and questioned about their activities abroad.⁵² One Uyghur individual testified at another’s asylum hearing that upon returning China in “July 2008 she was questioned at the airport about a photo the authorities had showing the [asylum] applicant at the community gathering with Rebiya Kadeer. Asked at the hearing why they would show her the photo the witness said they were asking all Uyghurs because it was just before the Olympic Games and because she was a Uyghur returning from overseas.”⁵³

In describing her experience to the Australian refugee tribunal, one Uyghur asylum seeker’s story shared many of features of the incidents that others have experienced.⁵⁴ Before even leaving China in 2008 it was difficult for her to get a passport, and she had to pay a bribe for the each of the seven stamps that were required. After her arrival in Australia on a student visa, her parents were contacted by authorities in Urumchi and told by the authorities that they would be punished if she became involved in Uyghur political organizations. Her father was demoted at work after visiting her in Australia and being accused of “having contact and political discussions with Uighurs in Australia,” and her mother dismissed from her position after discussing the events in Guangdong that proceeded the July 5th unrest in Urumchi over the telephone with her daughter. After she left for Australia in 2008 her parents began to be regularly questioned about their daughter’s activities in Australia.⁵⁵

She returned to visit them in 2010 due to her worries about this treatment, and a “few days after she arrived in Urumchi, she said that the Chinese secret service came and took her away in a police car to a place where she was blindfolded and taken into a room where she was questioned about her activities in Australia. She says that she was asked about whether she was involved in any political activities in Australia, who she was in

contact with, and whether she knew certain people. She was held and questioned for 2 days. The applicant maintained that she was a student and that she had no contact with Uyghur groups and did not know any of the people she was questioned about. After 2 days she was released and sent home.”⁵⁶ Upon her return to Australia in January 2011 she hesitated to lodge her application for asylum due to her fears about possible further repercussions for her parents. Although her initial request for asylum was denied, the tribunal found in her favor in an appeal hearing due to her activities with Uyghur groups in Australia that put her at risk of persecution if she returned to China.⁵⁷

Not actively participating in political events or speaking out against Chinese government policies is not a guarantee that Uyghurs overseas will be left alone. Because the very act of seeking asylum has political implications, the Chinese government seeks to discourage Uyghurs from attempting to claim asylum overseas, often using the same tactics as those used to silence reporters and activists. In 2012, many Uyghur asylum seekers in Europe reported that the police in their hometowns were calling them. The police tried to persuade them by telling them their parents would have their passports revoked if their children did not return. The local authorities also threatened asylum seekers’ relatives in person, telling them they must persuade them to return from Europe or have their passports revoked, ensuring they would never be able to see their relatives again. One Uyghur interviewed by RFA wondered at the Chinese authorities’ ability to track asylum seekers- “What is strange is that this happened at almost exactly the same time. How did the police get this information? That is what baffles me.”⁵⁸

Cases of the Chinese government monitoring Uyghur communities abroad take place wherever there is a significant population of Uyghurs. Turkey has had a Uyghur population since before the 1950s, including prominent political exiles, allowing them to set up organizations and publications in the Uyghur language and resisting Chinese pressure to deport Uyghurs.⁵⁹ As in other countries with a significant Uyghur presence, the Chinese government makes efforts to infiltrate Uyghur organizations, creating suspicions that can lead to “paralysis and passivity.”⁶⁰ The Chinese government has an interest in monitoring the Uyghur population of Turkey as a recent case illustrates. It was reported in the Turkish media that a Uyghur Chinese national with a Turkish residency permit was caught in May 2017 using her phone to take photos of people in Uyghur businesses in Istanbul.⁶¹ The employees of a Uyghur restaurant in Istanbul, all refugees, noticed her taking pictures of them and the patrons of the restaurant. Her phone had a number of pictures taken in Uyghur businesses in the city and she had been sending them to a Chinese phone number via WeChat. When taken to the police station she requested she be allowed to speak to the Chinese consulate, and was later released.⁶²

While not actively cooperating with the Chinese as Egypt has, there is still an increasing sense of insecurity in the Uyghur community in Turkey. In August 2016 the prominent Uyghur activist Abduqadir Yapchan was detained by Turkish authorities, a move instigated by the Chinese government according to other Uyghur activists.⁶³ Yapchan was among the Uyghur activists placed on a list of terrorists released by China in 2003. Several days after he was detained Turkish President Erdogan met with Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hangzhou and pledged to seek “more substantive results

in counter-terrorism cooperation.”⁶⁴ Yapchan had previously been detained in Turkey in 2008, as then-Prime Minister Erdogan traveled to China.⁶⁵ A judge initially ruled that there were no grounds for detaining him and he was released, only to be re-arrested the next day.⁶⁶ After being transferred to an immigration detention facility, the European Court of Human Rights released an interim decision that he should not be deported from Turkey until the case was settled. He refused to be transferred to Kazakhstan due to its close relations with China, and is currently seeking a third country with adequate protection of human rights.⁶⁷ While in Beijing in August of 2017, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that Turkey would not allow “any activities targeting or opposing China” and would “take measures to eliminate any media reports targeting China,” suggesting that the Turkish government may be beginning to take a more pro-China stance.⁶⁸

According to a Uyghur living in Turkey interviewed by UHRP, the Chinese embassy will not help Uyghurs with any documentation such as obtaining birth certificates or renewing passports without first getting them to cooperate with reporting on their relatives and social connections in Turkey, including their political attitudes and activities.⁶⁹ The embassy makes no secret of this to the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey. One student had his background and social connections described to him by an embassy official, demonstrating that someone had already reported on him.

Several Uyghurs in Turkey received voice messages and WeChat messages asking about the political activities of Uyghurs in Turkey, as well as the location of the students who fled to Turkey from Egypt; the callers threatened these Uyghurs with arrest on Turkish soil.⁷⁰ It is not only Uyghurs who are targeted as informants. One ethnic Turk, Can Uludag, told the Globe and Mail that he had been contacted in the summer of 2017 via Facebook and email and offered up to 500 U.S. dollars for information on the Uyghur community, and was told that there were already others engaged in informing on the Uyghur community via email in Turkey.⁷¹

This has created an atmosphere of fear in the Uyghur community in Turkey, according to the diaspora member UHRP interviewed. A conference on Uyghur literature in Istanbul, which had attracted around one hundred attendees in previous years, was down to fewer than ten in 2017.⁷² According to the individual UHRP interviewed, virtually every member in the Uyghur community in Turkey has a relative who has been sent to the re-education centers in East Turkestan. In April, Uyghurs in Turkey began to feel pressure to return from officials from their hometowns, and in June and July the pressure increased. Some Uyghurs living in Turkey decided to return home; one Uyghur chef working in a restaurant in Ankara returned and subsequently disappeared.⁷³

According to the individual interviewed by UHRP, in July the Chinese security officials who were involved in the detaining and deporting of Uyghur students in Egypt in the summer of 2017 had arrived in Turkey after a stop in Dubai. Thus far the Turkish government has not cooperated with deporting Uyghurs to China, but recently a Uyghur Canadian citizen was deported to Canada and the authorities searched the house of a local Uyghur activist.⁷⁴

Monitoring dissidents is likely to remain a prime concern for the Chinese government as repression worsens within China's borders, but the above cases show that the Chinese government's desire to maintain control over Uyghurs beyond its borders goes beyond those engaged in political activities. While Canadian national Erkin Kurban's experience shows that the Chinese security services have not given up the strategy of attempting to recruit Uyghurs as spies while they are on Chinese soil, the Swedish and German cases suggest that they are increasingly confident in their intelligence operations overseas. Using threats against family members remaining within China remains one of the Chinese government's most effective tools.

Cases of Targeting Reporters, Activists and Students

North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand

Retaliation against family members is one of the most common techniques that the Chinese authorities use in their attempts to silence overseas dissidents. It has been used against those the authorities perceive as threats for many years and it is by no means limited to Uyghurs. One recent example is the imprisonment of former Southern Weekend journalist Chang Ping's siblings after he published an editorial in Deutsche Welle critical of Xi Jinping's treatment of journalists.⁷⁵

This tactic long been used against those in the Uyghur diaspora who work to report on news related to the Uyghur issue and activists who seek to advocate for Uyghur rights. Chinese authorities often call overseas Uyghurs in an attempt to intimidate them into stopping their activism, often with their relatives present as leverage. This is what happened to Canadian citizen Mehmet Tohti in 2007. An official called him from Kashgar identifying himself as from the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and said that they had his mother and brother with them, having driven them hundreds of miles from their hometown of Kharghilik to Kashgar. His mother asked him to stop his political activities and the officers implied they could retaliate against his family members. He continued to receive similar calls, and even says that he has experienced intimidating incidents on Canadian soil, namely Chinese men sitting outside his house at night, which he reported to Canada's intelligence service.⁷⁶ Attempts at intimidation have been reported in other countries as well; in 2009, Asgar Can, then Vice President of the World Uyghur Congress, told the German media that threatening calls had been made to the WUC's offices, saying: "It will be for you like it is for Uyghurs in the homeland... We know where your office is."⁷⁷ It is not possible to ascertain whether this was an official action or not.

Applying pressure to family members and having them call their relatives abroad to push them to cease their political activities is one of the most common tactics used by the Chinese authorities. Kaiser Ozhun Abdurusul, president of UyghurPEN, told Swedish media in 2009 that his father had been called into a police station near Kashgar and shown surveillance photos of him and his wife in Sweden, as well as detailed information on his activities in Sweden.⁷⁸ Abdurusul's father was told that unless his son ceased his political activities he would never get a passport to be able to see his son again. Abdurusul cut off contact with his family remaining in East Turkestan, fearing repercussions for them. This tactic is unfortunately often effective, one Uyghur activist told UHRP.⁷⁹ Putting their relatives in danger while they are out of reach of the authorities in the West causes considerable guilt.

The experience of Ilshat Hassan Kokbore presents a classic case of this type of harassment taking place on U.S. soil. He had been known to the authorities since the 1980s due to his political activism, and fled East Turkestan in 2003. After settling in the U.S. in 2006, he became politically active in the Uyghur American Association, leading to serious difficulties for his family members who remained at home. His wife and son were not able to get passports, leaving them essentially hostages. He divorced his wife

hoping this would end the authorities' threats and surveillance, but it continued. One of his sisters was imprisoned for nearly a year without charge.⁸⁰

Although the authorities have been known to use this tactic against those not politically active to pressure them to monitor their peers or to return to China, nevertheless it is those engaged in reporting potentially politically sensitive topics regarding events in East Turkestan who are most likely to be subjected to it. Though Uyghurs who are not politically active are pressured by authorities to monitor their peers or return to China, those who are engaged in reporting or activism are most frequently targeted. One prominent case is that of Shohret Hoshur, a journalist from Radio Free Asia who has managed to report on events taking place in East Turkestan despite the difficulty getting access to the region. Based in Washington D.C., Hoshur gets his information by calling into the region after an incident happens, although he assumes that all calls made into East Turkestan from overseas are recorded.⁸¹ After 2012 to 2013, years with a large number of violent incidents, pressure on his family increased. One of his brothers was arrested and sentenced to five years imprisonment in a mass trial for disclosing state secrets. Two of his other brothers were detained after they spoke to him over the phone; they asked him to tell the world about their brother's situation, to which he replied that they should be patient. The Global Times reported that Hoshur and his brothers were referencing terrorist attacks they were planning on carrying out, although they did not mention Hoshur by name.⁸²

Hoshur told UHRP that these kinds of tactics are widely used on the families of Uyghurs who reside overseas, and are effective in causing Uyghurs to self-censor and be more cautious in their political activities. Those Uyghurs with relatives who have been harassed or imprisoned are reluctant to come forward and speak to the media or the authorities of the countries in which they reside for fear of worsening the situation. He said that he believes there is not much the international community can do to help.⁸³

Another tactic is to pressure governments to treat Uyghurs, especially those engaged in rights advocacy, as terrorists. These tactics go back to before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, although the Chinese state has increasingly pushed the narrative of Uyghurs as a terrorist threat in the years since. One frequent target of this is Dolkun Isa, the current General Secretary of the World Uyghur Congress. The Chinese government attempts to influence other nations into denying him entry, including through the use of the INTERPOL Red Notice system. He was flagged as a terrorist through the system, a fact he first became aware of in 1999, before the events of 9/11 increased China's efforts to frame Uyghur activism as terrorism and when protections against abuses of the system by repressive regimes were particularly weak. He only became aware he was on the list when police in Germany held him after attempting to cross the border. The police verified his asylum status and determined that the Red Notice, issued in 1997, was illegitimate, but warned him against traveling to Asia. He was subsequently placed on a public list of terrorists that the Ministry of Public Security published in 2003.⁸⁴

Since that time, he has been prevented from entering a number of countries, including Switzerland, South Korea, Turkey, and the United States. Requests to the U.S. Congress and U.S. State Department allowed him to be taken off the U.S.'s list of threats and

obtain a visa, but other nations' policies are less clear- he is uncertain, for instance, why he was barred from entering Turkey in 2008 after having made numerous trips in the past.⁸⁵ The incident in South Korea was perhaps most disturbing, as he was very concerned that he was in danger of refooulment to China.⁸⁶ Having been detained at the airport for three days due to being flagged by the INTERPOL Red Notice, he was expelled from the country after intervention by EU authorities.

Isa's ability to get a visa to enter a country became a political football in the case of India revoking his visa after initially granting him one to attend a conference in Dharamsala in 2016,⁸⁷ many observers saw the initial granting of his visa as retaliation for China blocking an attempt by members of the UN to designate the founder of a Kashmiri militant group as a terrorist,⁸⁸ a move illustrative of the political nature of China's use of the 'terrorist' label. Omer Kanat, then Vice President of the World Uyghur Congress was also informed that his Indian visa was canceled as he prepared to travel to Dharamsala.

The Red Notice system has for most of its existence been opaque. In 2010 Mr. Isa requested access to his file and it took two years for the Commission for Control of INTERPOL's Files (CCF) to respond. INTERPOL requires the permission of the country that posted the information to make it public; the Chinese did not permit the CCF to confirm whether there was one.⁸⁹ In 2015, INTERPOL reformed the Red Notice system in an effort to prevent its use against refugees and asylum seekers, but the appointment of the Chinese Vice Minister of Public Security Meng Hongwei as president of the organization has raised concerns. A recent push by INTERPOL to share biometric data of terrorist suspects also has the potential for misuse.⁹⁰ China has increased its issuing of Red Notices as its anti-corruption campaign takes on an international character and it pursues suspects overseas, but the political nature of the way China uses the system is likely to undermine its use as a tool for in pursuing legitimate criminal suspects.



Meng Hongwei Addresses INTERPOL© Xinhua

The Chinese authorities continue to try to paint Mr. Isa and other Uyghur activists as terrorists. Before China's Universal Periodic Review in 2013 the Chinese Mission to the United Nations in Geneva circulated allegations about Mr. Isa's involvement in terrorism to the press.⁹¹ The Chinese delegation frequently tries to disrupt Uyghur advocacy at the UN. It tries to bar Dolkun Isa and Rebiya Kadeer from the UN Human Rights Council on the grounds that they have evidence

that they are connected to terrorist activity,⁹² and otherwise disrupts their participation. During the WUC's speech at the 9th UN Forum on Minority Issues in 2016, China objected on a point of order, leading to twenty minutes of discussion of the WUC's right

to speak, supported by Austria, Finland, Ireland and Switzerland and opposed by Iran, Russia, Egypt, Pakistan, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Indonesia.⁹³ Isa was escorted out of the UN Human Rights Committee Session in Geneva in 2007, and most recently in May 2017 was forced to leave a meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York.⁹⁴ In July of 2017 local police prevented him from entering the Italian Senate and detained him at the request of China, according to the officers.⁹⁵ In response several members of the Italian Parliament requested clarification on who requested Mr. Isa be detained and what steps the Italian authorities were taking to ensure that the Red Notice system was not being abused.⁹⁶

In 2006, the Bavarian Green Party asked Bavarian authorities to investigate whether the Chinese were reading their emails and the extent to which Chinese intelligence was active in Munich.⁹⁷ In November of that year Chinese Consul General Yang Huiqun visited their offices in the Bavarian state parliament. He showed them invitations from the WUC and a list of members who were intending to meet with WUC delegates which had only been circulated via private e-mail between the MPs and the WUC. When asked where he got the list he replied that “the Consulate had ‘its own information channels.’”⁹⁸ The Consul urged them not to meet with the activists, saying they were terrorists who were under observation by the BfV. The BfV said that the WUC was in fact not under investigation, and that the Chinese had asked them to ban the event as well.

Another case of a politically active Uyghur experiencing issues with freedom of movement is that of Umit Hamit Agahi. He travelled to Hungary in 2013 as Vice-President of the World Uyghur Congress leading a youth delegation to meet with youth members of the World Federation of Hungarians. Police went to the hotel where the delegation was staying and checked the papers of all the members then shut down the hotel alleging a fire code violation. Umit Hamit was detained by police and for twelve hours and interrogated on suspicion of being a terrorist. When the youth delegation went to the headquarters of the World Federation of Hungarians it was shut down by police, allegedly due to a bomb threat. As a German citizen, he has a right to travel freely in EU countries, but was expelled from the country along with the rest of the delegation. He suspects that China alerted the Hungarian authorities and accused Hamit of being a terrorist, but it is unclear through what channel they did so.⁹⁹ Police initially said that Umit would be barred from returning to Hungary, but a local court determined that their actions were illegal and Hamit returned to hold a press conference on the issue.

The Chinese government has also attempted to block Uyghur activism abroad by protesting events held by Uyghur activists. The Chinese consulate in Melbourne requested that a documentary about the life of Rebiya Kadeer be withdrawn from the Melbourne International Film Festival and her visa revoked. The Australian government and festival organizers refused the requests and the showing of the film went forward. The festival’s website was hacked, the film schedule replaced with Chinese flags and anti-Kadeer slogans. Though it is not possible to determine whether or not this was coordinated by the Chinese authorities, but the director of the film believed that the abusive emails he was subjected to were part of a coordinated strategy.¹⁰⁰ Chinese filmmakers who had entries in the festival pulled them out but denied that there was pressure from their government to do so. China also applied pressure to New Zealand,

attempting to prevent the film from being broadcast on the Maori Television channel and eventually convinced the broadcasting station to show a Chinese government made documentary on the 2009 unrest in Urumqi, albeit with a disclaimer.¹⁰¹



The Melbourne International Film Festival's website after hack © Australian Film Review

Chinese embassies engage with overseas Chinese communities and attempt to influence opinion among them, and even on occasion organize them. Bodies like the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office exist for this very purpose, and embassies' education departments serve as another means of recruiting informers, according to Chen Yonglin, a staff member of the Chinese embassy to Australia who alleged that the embassy cultivated 1,000 informers among the overseas Chinese students.¹⁰² In 2010 Richard Fadden, then Director of Canada's counterintelligence service CSIS, gave a speech at the Royal Canadian Military Institute describing activities conducted by the Chinese embassy in Canada: "They're funding Confucius institutes in most of the campuses across Canada...They're sort of managed by people who are operating out of the embassy or consulates. Nobody knows that the Chinese authorities are involved. ...They've organized demonstrations to deal with what are called the five poisons: Taiwan, Falun Gong, and others."¹⁰³

Uyghurs naturalized as citizens of other countries sometimes have difficulty obtaining visas to China. James Millward, a professor of Chinese history at Georgetown University, said in an interview that he was aware of a Uyghur-American student who had won a scholarship to study in China from her Confucius Institute-sponsored Chinese language class but was denied a visa to study in China, alone among a group of students.¹⁰⁴

The Chinese embassy uses student groups such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Association to organize protests, and to monitor Chinese students involvement in sensitive issues such as human rights.¹⁰⁵ The 2008 Olympic torch relay was an example of this type of embassy-sponsored protest. While the counter-protestors at the Olympic torch relay in 2008 were likely motivated to some degree by genuine patriotism, Chinese embassies and consulates encouraged and organized them. In Canberra, Tibetan and

Uyghur protestors clashed with Chinese counter-protestors, leading to police intervention. The student-led counter-protest group had received support from the Chinese embassy, including free travel and accommodations.¹⁰⁶ The Chinese government puts pressure on institutes of higher education as well; after initially inviting Rebiya Kadeer to speak at Auckland University in New Zealand, the school revoked her invitation due to security concerns, a move the student association president attributed to the institution's financial reliance on Chinese students.¹⁰⁷ Kadeer was re-invited by one of the institution's law lecturers and the event went ahead as planned.¹⁰⁸

Pressure on Uyghur Students Studying Abroad

In early May 2017, Uyghur students studying abroad in multiple countries including France, Australia, the United States, Egypt and Turkey were ordered by Chinese authorities to return their hometowns by May 20th. A police officer in Payziwat county, Baren township told Radio Free Asia that the policy had been ordered by the regional government and was intended to “identify their political and ideological stance, and then educate them about our country's laws and current developments.”¹⁰⁹ The police officer mentioned that only the Uyghur students had been ordered to return home, suggesting that suspicions about Uyghurs' political stance have spread beyond those who seek asylum and that efforts at monitoring and controlling them are escalating. Once again, threats toward family members were used to obtain the students' compliance, with some returning because their parents and siblings were being detained. Uyghurs studying abroad in Canada were too afraid of the possible consequences to their families to report this pressure to the government or media, according to Rukiye Turdush, a Uyghur Canadian activist.¹¹⁰ One student studying in the United States was allowed to return after speaking to the police in his hometown of Baren.¹¹¹ A government official was specially assigned to speak to the parents of Uyghur students studying abroad, telling them “to advise their children so that they don't go astray and don't take part in any anti-China activities.”¹¹² Uyghur students studying in Japan contacted UHRP stating that in April they also began experiencing pressure from the authorities to return to their hometowns. Family members called them and told them they were required to return. One individual reported being interrogated about the Uyghur community in Japan, and was placed in political training. The whereabouts and situation of others who returned from Japan are not known, according to information obtained by UHRP.

The pressure on students studying in Egypt was particularly intense, and began in January of 2017.¹¹³ A Uyghur al-Azhar student told Reuters that pressure on students' families had begun last year, saying “Some of us were asked, under pressure, to go back to China, by force applied to their families...Some of my fellow students returned, some remained in Egypt and some fled in fear to surrounding countries like Turkey.”¹¹⁴ In July 2017 Egyptian security forces detained and deported those who did not return voluntarily. Egyptian aviation officials told the media that they had been ordered by the Egyptian police to put at least 22 Uyghur individuals on flights to China on July 6th.¹¹⁵



Photo of police raid on a Uyghur restaurant in Cairo circulated on social media © RFA

The previous month the Egyptian Interior Ministry and the Chinese Ministry of Public Security had signed a “technical cooperation document” in a meeting that “dealt with issues of common concern,” although the details of the subjects discussed were not made public.¹¹⁶ Police raided several Uyghur restaurants in Cairo, and Uyghur activists alleged that police were searching for Uyghurs at their places of residence as well.¹¹⁷ Al-Azhar University denied that students had been detained on campus, while Egyptian state reported that officials were denying that Uyghurs were being targeted, saying they were expelling individuals without valid visas.¹¹⁸ However, Uyghurs who spoke to RFA said that individuals with valid visas were also being deported.¹¹⁹ On July 19th 2017, local activists reported that the detained students had been moved by the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior to a prison in Cairo, where they were being interrogated by both Egyptian and Chinese officials;¹²⁰ among those interrogating the students was the head of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association in Egypt, according to several students who were later released.¹²¹ Ultimately over two hundred Uyghurs were detained and several dozen deported to China; approximately eighty are believed to still be in detention, with another sixteen still unaccounted for.¹²²

Central Asia

The former Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are home to the largest numbers of Uyghurs living outside of East Turkestan, estimated to number from over 300,000 to as many as one million.¹²³ Even trying to count the precise number of citizens of Uyghur background in these nations can be politically sensitive.¹²⁴ Soviet authorities established Uyghur cultural centers, academic departments and Uyghur language media in an effort to demonstrate their treatment of minorities was more favorable than the CCP's.¹²⁵ Although the fall of the Soviet Union allowed genuine Uyghur civil society institutions to emerge in some of its successor states, the space for Uyghurs to organize has narrowed as Chinese influence has increased.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are all members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, established as the Shanghai Five in 1996 before Uzbekistan joined in 2001. Although the Uyghur issue may not have been the sole reason for its establishment, it was and remains a high priority for the Chinese government. According to Graham E. Fuller and Frederick Starr, "strict control by neighboring states over the activities of their citizens with respect to Xinjiang are rewarded [by China] with concrete benefits in the areas of trade and investment. In practice, this has led to restrictions on the rights of citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that go well beyond denial of the right of sanctuary to Uyghur terrorists."¹²⁶

The 2009 Shanghai Cooperation Organization Convention on Counterterrorism gives member states the ability to claim jurisdiction in cases outside of their own territory if an alleged terrorist attack or planned attack is aimed at them. This means that in theory China could, for example, "assert its jurisdiction over Kazakh citizens of Uyghur ethnicity, located in Kazakhstan and alleged to be plotting a terrorist act in China."¹²⁷

SCO countries have increasingly placed limits on Uyghurs' rights to conduct peaceful political organization, and they have become dangerous places for Uyghur asylum seekers. The situation differs from the West in that it is local security services that are behind much of the harassment of the Uyghur population. The number of Uyghur studies departments in institutions of higher education has declined, as have the number of Uyghur schools and Uyghur language publications and broadcasts.¹²⁸ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan all saw unexplained murders of leaders of Uyghur political, cultural and charitable organizations from 1997 to the early 2000s, and refolement of Uyghurs to China also increased beginning in the late '90s, and activists deported to China faced long prison sentences, executions or were simply disappeared.¹²⁹ One example is the case of Ershidin Israil, who in 2011 was deported back to China after fleeing to Kazakhstan.¹³⁰ His initial granting of refugee status by the UNHCR was revoked for unclear reasons, though his supporters believe it was on the basis of fabricated evidence, including a photo doctored to make him appear to wear a beard.¹³¹

Another case that has garnered international attention is that of Canadian citizen Huseyin Celil, who fled China in 1994 after being imprisoned for broadcasting the call to prayer. During a visit to his wife's family in Uzbekistan in 2006 he was arrested by Uzbek authorities and sent to China. The Chinese authorities did not recognize his Canadian citizenship; Canadian consular officers were not allowed access to him during his trial,

where he was sentenced to life in prison. His sentence was reduced to 20 years in 2016, not including time served.¹³² Celil's lawyer believes the Chinese authorities were watching him on Canadian soil: "I've maintained all along that the reason Huseyin came on the radar of the Chinese authorities was because of activities here...they monitored him and they knew he was travelling."¹³³

Despite being less politically restrictive than Uzbekistan, Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan also experience close monitoring by the government. The largest Uyghur organization there, the Kyrgyz-Uyghur Unity Organization (Ittipak), was founded in 1989. Its activities are monitored by the government, which tries to ensure that the organization does not become involved in issues related to Uyghurs in China.¹³⁴ Its leaders Dilmurat Akbarov and Jamaldin Nasyrov were detained in 2009 for organizing a demonstration of around 500 people calling for independent investigation of the violence in Urumchi.¹³⁵ In 2010 Omer Kanat was traveling to Kazakhstan in his capacity as Vice President of the World Uyghur Congress and was detained upon his arrival at the airport in Almaty. After several hours of questioning he was deported back to Turkey and told that he was not allowed to travel to any SCO member country. In 2011, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan prevented Uyghur activists from attending a conference on Uyghur issues in Washington, D.C. Leaders of Kazakh and Kyrgyz Uyghur organizations were prevented leaving at the airport while others who had been invited were warned by police against attempting to attend.¹³⁶



2009 Protest in Bishkek organized by Ittipak © RFE/RL

The Kyrgyz security services interfere in attempts to publicize the situation of Uyghurs in China, for example telling Ittipak not to disseminate information on Uyghurs deported to China,¹³⁷ or trying to prevent the screening of a documentary on Rebiya Kedeer.¹³⁸ In 2017, one Kyrgyzstani Uyghur told al Jazeera that the Uyghur community is increasingly concerned about their situation, saying "when we celebrate a holiday or attend a wedding,

we only talk about business, family or friends because politics is not something Uyghurs in Bishkek want to discuss.”¹³⁹

Pakistan

In nations with closer relations to China it is easier to exert influence over local Uyghur groups. Pakistan has a small Uyghur community of approximately 300 families who settled in the country from the 1930s to the 1990s, many of them descendants of mixed marriages between Uyghurs and Pakistanis.¹⁴⁰ Since the 90s, the Pakistani government has increasingly bowed to Chinese pressure on the Uyghur issue. The earliest reported deportation of Uyghurs to China took place in 1997. In the wake of the Ghulja massacre 14 students were deported to China and reportedly executed; numerous other accounts of arrests and deportations of Uyghurs have been made in the time since.¹⁴¹ In 2000, the Pakistani government closed down two shelters for Uyghur immigrants and pilgrims that had been in operation for decades and pressured madrassas not to accept Uyghur students.¹⁴²

China maintains a pro-Chinese Uyghur group, the Overseas Chinese Association of Pakistan (OCAP), which the independent Omer Uyghur Trust calls an attempt to counter the influence of their organization, saying they provide information on their activities to the Chinese embassy in Islamabad.¹⁴³ One Uyghur activist told RFA that Chinese efforts to influence the Rawalpindi Uyghur community began after the Omer Uyghur Trust opened a Uyghur language elementary school in 2009.¹⁴⁴ The embassy provided funds for OCAP to set up a school with no Uyghur language instruction, and paid local Uyghurs to send their children there. According to its founders, the Uyghur language school lost enrollment and shut down in 2010 after pressure from the Chinese embassy on the Pakistani government and the school’s landlord.¹⁴⁵ The Overseas Chinese Association is more focused on spreading Mandarin instruction in Pakistan than preserving Uyghur heritage; it began providing money to set up centers to teach Chinese in Gilgit-Baltistan in 2012,¹⁴⁶ although the first center reportedly began operation in 2014.¹⁴⁷

The Overseas Chinese Association of Pakistan is in many ways a classic example of United Front work, set up to undermine any voices critical of the Chinese government. It maintains close ties to the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, which provides opportunities to travel to China and support for studying Chinese to Uyghur-Pakistanis.¹⁴⁸ It also gives money directly to members of the community, though it is not clear on what basis it is distributed- one Uyghur man from Gilgit complained: “The Chinese government isn’t really doing anything for us...they give money to some people, but then these people use the money for themselves and the others don’t get anything.”¹⁴⁹ The General Secretary of the Gilgit branch of the organization has complained about misappropriation of funds.¹⁵⁰



The Chinese Ambassador visits the Chinese funded school in 2013 © PRC Embassy Islamabad

Ethnic Uyghur Pakistani nationals have reported being pressured to spy. One Pakistan-born individual, Kamirdin Abdurahman, received refugee status in Afghanistan after having been detained and interrogated for fifteen days during a trip to visit relatives in Yarkand in 2009, and after his release was asked to spy on the activities of Uyghurs in Pakistan. The Omer Uyghur Trust said they knew of others who had been pressured to spy, but Abdurahman was the first to speak to the media.¹⁵¹ He said that in Afghanistan he had received calls from the head of the OCAP and a Chinese security official telling him to give up his asylum status and return to Islamabad, and had later been visited in person by a Pakistani and a Uyghur-Pakistani who asked him to go with them to the Chinese embassy in Afghanistan.¹⁵² Pakistani police detained the relatives of Omer and Akbar Khan, the Omer Uyghur Trust's founders, in 2010. The brothers said the Pakistani authorities were acting on pressure from the Chinese government due to their plans to attend a training session for Uyghur activists in Belgium.¹⁵³ They were placed on the government's exit control list in 2011 and were removed from it in 2014 after intervention from the courts.¹⁵⁴

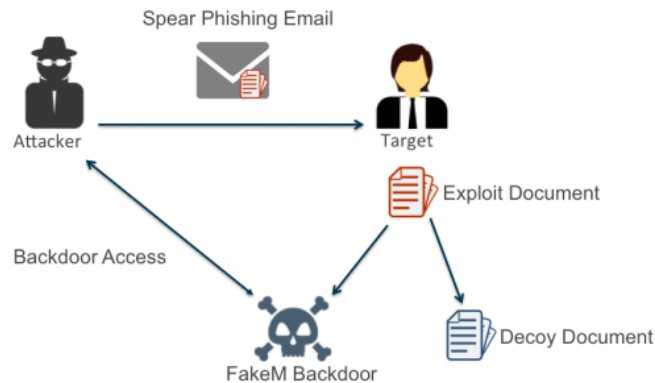
Cases of Monitoring and Disrupting the Online Communications of Uyghurs Abroad

Thorough control of online communication has been a serious concern of the Chinese government since the internet first came to China, and has increased with its rapid spread. The authorities see this control as vital to the security of the Party's rule, and their concerns do not stop at the border. As Citizen Lab's Sarah McKune notes, with its "official rhetoric and official positions surrounding foreign hostile forces, the government has cast non-state entities such as media outlets, journalists, NGOs, think tanks, and other civil society actors as legitimate adversarial targets" and that from the Chinese government's perspective "exfiltrated information regarding civil society plans to advance human rights issues may be considered just as valuable to stability efforts as information on foreign defense industries."¹⁵⁵ The Chinese government has long regarded overseas Uyghur groups as one of these adversarial targets.

The World Uyghur Congress experienced a large Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack starting on June 28th, 2011 in advance of the anniversary of the 2009 unrest in Urumchi in an effort to disrupt the organization of any commemoration events.¹⁵⁶ The WUC created an alternate Wordpress site to ensure that the organization of the events could proceed, but were soon alerted by Wordpress staff that the blog was undergoing a number of large Denial of Service attacks; the blog soon went down. The WUC site remained down until July 11th, several days after the end of the anniversary of the unrest. During this period, WUC telephone communications were also disrupted by constant incoming calls from an unidentified number to both their office phone and both the personal landline and cell phone number of WUC Secretary General Dolkun Isa. Email communication was similarly effected through a massive amount of spam sent to the general email account and that of Mr. Isa.

The websites of other organizations with some connection to Uyghur human rights advocacy have also been disrupted. The German city of Weimar announced in June 2017 that it had awarded its annual human rights prize to imprisoned Uyghur professor Ilham Tohti. Following the announcement the pages of the city's website related to the award were repeatedly attacked, including some content relating to the prize being deleted over the summer, followed by an attack in November which deleted information about the upcoming award ceremony in December.¹⁵⁷ Though the party responsible could not be immediately identified, suspicion fell upon China.¹⁵⁸

The WUC has also been subjected to constant phishing emails, sent to staff members with virus attachments intended to install malicious software that gives outside parties access to their computers; several staff members have had their email compromised. The next year the WUC warned that their email was being spoofed in phishing attacks on other organizations and activists.¹⁵⁹



Scarlet Mimic’s “spear phishing with decoy” attack pattern © Palo Alto Networks

A number of private cybersecurity firms have confirmed that overseas groups concerned with the rights of minority groups in China are frequently the target of cyber-attacks utilizing a variety of vulnerabilities to gain access to their communications. Although it is difficult to directly implicate a government for these kinds of attacks, their targets suggest that the attackers are serving the Chinese authorities. Palo Alto Networks identified a group they called “Scarlet Mimic” which for at least four years has utilized spear phishing and watering hole attacks to gain access to activist group’s computers via malware dubbed FakeM.¹⁶⁰ They also “found evidence to indicate the group also targets individuals working inside government anti-terrorist organizations. We suspect these targets are selected based on their access to information about the targeted minority groups.”¹⁶¹

The Chinese government can utilize websites hosted outside of the country, including those blocked by the Great Firewall, to collect information on people visiting them both inside the country even when using TOR or a VPN. In 2015, cybersecurity firm Alienvault identified a watering hole attack which used Javascript to modify the content of “Chinese-language websites associated with NGOs, Uyghur communities and Islamic associations” to collect the private data of people who visit these websites when they logged into popular Chinese websites.¹⁶² Obtaining the usernames of people who visited these websites allows the government to identify individuals despite them using online privacy tools.

| Website | Global Rank | Rank in China | Information leaked |
|--|-------------|---------------|--|
| baidu.com | 5 | 1 | username |
| taobao.com | 9 | 2 | MemberId, Nickname, Mobile Phone Number, LoginId |
| qq.com | 10 | 3 | UserId |
| sina.com.cn | 13 | 4 | UserId |
| sohu.com | 34 | 8 | Nickname, PassportID (mail service) |
| 360.cn | 54 | 9 | Profile name, profile ID |
| tianya.cn | 65 | 11 | UserId |
| 163.com | 75 | 18 | UserId |
| youku.com | 92 | 19 | Username UserId |
| jd.com | 94 | 20 | UserId |
| alipay.com | 96 | 22 | MemberId, Nickname, Mobile Phone Number, LoginId |
| ifeng.com | 197 | 32 | Username, UserId |
| gome.com.cn | 350 | 73 | LoginName, LoginID |
| 58.com | 492 | 87 | Username, email, userid, nickname |
| suning.com | 925 | 134 | UserId |
| ctrip.com | 1153 | 167 | UserId, Phone number |
| renren.com | 727 | 177 | UserId, Real Name, Username, birthday, sex |
| qunar.com | 1501 | 196 | UserId, NickName |

Websites used to identify users in China visiting Uyghur websites © AlienVault

Attacks on mobile phones have also been developed. In 2013, Kaspersky Labs identified a type of malware delivered from a hijacked Tibetan activist’s phone hidden in a message designed to appear as an email from the WUC. The malware infected Android phones, allowing the attackers to access call logs and texts, contacts, geo-location and phone data.¹⁶³

A report by the Toronto based Citizen Lab describes these kinds of threats as “employ[ing] technically unsophisticated malware” exploiting vulnerabilities which have been patched for a long time, suggesting the attackers see civil society organizations (CSOs) as “soft targets,”¹⁶⁴ pointing out that civil society groups have fewer resources to defend themselves against these kinds of threats than governments and the commercial sector. Nevertheless, the attacks display a “greater sophistication around the social engineering employed in attacks against CSO’s,” often spoofing someone the target knows, using timely or repurposed authentic content. An analysis of suspicious emails sent to two members of the WUC over four years revealed that attacks directed at the WUC also targeted as many as 38 other Uyghur NGOs as well as 28 other NGOs and 41 journalistic, academic, and political organizations, mostly with malicious Microsoft Office and Adobe attachments.¹⁶⁵

Compromising the communications of dissidents and human rights groups can put those who remain in China at risk. After a number of Yahoo accounts were hacked in 2010, Dilshat Raxit reported that he was unable to reach some of his contacts inside China who he had communicated with via email in the past.¹⁶⁶ In some cases, private companies worsen the situation by failing to inform their customers, as in 2015 when former

Microsoft employees revealed that the company had decided not to tell the hackers' targets, many of them Uyghurs, that their email accounts had been compromised, although Microsoft decided to change their policy after questioning from Reuters.¹⁶⁷

These attacks, Citizen Lab points out, leave no safe haven for dissidents abroad- they find “their computers and mobile devices compromised, their communications monitored, and their movements tracked—*as if they were still in the country from which they fled.*”¹⁶⁸

Conclusion

This report argues that the harassment of Uyghurs overseas is a longstanding tactic of the Chinese government to attempt to discourage any political activity among them and to monitor those who are or may be inclined to become politically active. The primary and most effective means to do this is threatening family members who remain within Chinese borders. This includes everything from restricting their movements by preventing them from getting passports and preventing them from being able to communicate freely with loved ones abroad to being subjected to detention, harassment by the authorities, or being fired from their jobs or dismissed from school.

It is not only those still under the power of the Chinese authorities who are subjected to harassment. Because the Chinese government fears the influence of overseas dissidents, they make efforts to prevent the movement of politically active Uyghurs, using means such as pressuring other nations to view them as terrorists, including through the use of international bodies like INTERPOL.

Espionage against the Uyghur community overseas is a priority for the Chinese security services. Methods for recruiting informers include threatening family members who remain in East Turkestan in addition to tactics like payment and offers to aid in getting a good job when they return to China which are used more often to recruit Han in the Chinese diaspora. There is reason to believe that espionage against dissident communities in the West is increasing, or at least getting more aggressive as China gains confidence in its power and abilities. There have been significant cases of espionage against the Uyghur community in Europe, but communities in North America and Australia are also subjected to Chinese attempts to recruit them as informers.

Although countries and multilateral entities such as the United States, Australia and in the EU are primarily concerned with China's industrial and military espionage, the Chinese government's effort to spy on dissidents should not be dismissed as irrelevant to national security. As the Swedish Security Service points out, refugee espionage can create the risk of citizens who support dissidents becoming the subject of monitoring by foreign governments, as well as "a risk that refugee espionage could evolve into other forms of espionage, as individuals who have already been intimidated into spying on their countrymen in Sweden are susceptible to continued extortion attempts for other types of information."¹⁶⁹

This kind of monitoring is intended not only to gather information on Uyghurs and other dissident groups, but also to intimidate them into not exercising their rights to assembly and speech even in Western countries. The Chinese government's effort to prevent Uyghur activists from participating at the UN forums should concern both the UN itself and member countries which want to ensure that international human rights mechanisms are not interfered with.

Informers are no longer the only means to monitor dissident groups in the era of modern communications technology. The Chinese government uses a number of techniques to break into the communications of Uyghur groups in an effort to gain access to

information regarding membership, activities and other business. Once access is gained, monitoring can continue for a considerable time if the intrusion is not detected. Because civil society groups are not as well resourced as governments and businesses they are particularly vulnerable to this kind of monitoring. Those attempting to spy on the communications of activists and dissidents do not generally use the most innovative techniques, but rather rely on simple methods such as spear phishing that none the less demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of their target, showing that the Chinese security services expend considerable effort on this mission.

Recommendations

For the Government of the People's Republic of China:

Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees that “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation.” China should make efforts to adhere to Article 12 by:

Cease the practice of threatening the family members of overseas Uyghurs to create leverage over them to either cease their political activities or to coerce them into becoming informers on the overseas Uyghur community.

Cease the illegitimate targeting the overseas Uyghur community for monitoring and espionage.

Stop putting pressure governments to designate Uyghurs engaged in lawful political activism as terrorists.

End the practice threats against family members to force Uyghur students studying abroad to return to their hometowns for political assessment and re-education.

Do not use the INTERPOL Red Notice system to illegitimately brand Uyghurs as terrorists or criminals.

Abide by Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which China has signed but not ratified, guaranteeing freedom of movement, including the right to leave one's own country.

Ensure Uyghur's right to freedom of movement by removing barriers to obtaining travel documents and cease to issuing orders for Uyghurs who are lawfully residing abroad to return home.

For Concerned Governments and International Institutions:

Acknowledge the pervasiveness of the Chinese government's monitoring of Chinese dissident communities, particularly of ethnic minority groups including the Uyghurs and make efforts to counter and discourage this behavior by the Chinese authorities on their soil by investigating and prosecuting cases and by raising the issue with Chinese diplomatic missions and during bilateral talks on human rights.

Acknowledge that the Chinese government's branding of Uyghur activists as terrorists is spurious, and ensure that their legal rights to free movement are not infringed upon.

Abide by the principle of non-refoulment and other principles in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. Nations that abide by these principles should raise the issue with nations that have ratified ICCPR but fail to abide by its principles.

Work to ensure that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization complies with human rights obligations, including those enumerated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. SCO member countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Pakistan should abide by the principles of non-refoulment.

Ensure that INTERPOL enacts needed reforms to prevent abuses of the Red Notice system, continues the process of increasing transparency in its operations and maintains a commitment to its stated principle to act “in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Investigate cases of Uyghur activists being barred from United Nations forums they are accredited to participate in and take steps to ensure that such cases do not happen in the future.

Develop international norms which restrain the use of cyber-attacks and cyber espionage against civil society organizations

Issue alerts from governments and private companies to dissidents to regarding compromise of their private communications if they become aware of them.

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The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) was founded by the Uyghur American Association (UAA) in 2004 with a supporting grant from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). UHRP's mission is to promote human rights and democracy for the Uyghur people. In 2016, UHRP became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-exempt organization.

UHRP works to raise the profile of the Uyghur people by:

Researching, writing and publishing commentary and reports in English and Chinese covering a broad range human rights issues involving civil and political rights, through to social cultural and economic rights;
Preparing briefings – either written or in person – for journalists, academics, diplomats and legislators on the human rights situation faced by the Uyghur people.

The Uyghur Human Rights Project
1420 K Street N.W., Suite 350,
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: (202) 478-1920 Fax: (202) 478-1910
www.uhrp.org info@uhrp.org