

# XINJIANG 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which cites the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), states that citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities,” without defining “normal.” No religious group may carry out any religious activities without government approval.

National regulations require all clergy to pledge allegiance to the CCP and socialism, “resist illegal religious activities and religious extremist ideology, and resist infiltration by foreign forces using religion.” Additional Xinjiang-specific regulations call for a “crack down” on “religious extremist forces” and prohibit “the use of religion” to obstruct family planning. National and local counterterrorism laws identify several religious observances as indicators of “extremism,” including praying. Regional regulations implementing the national counterterrorism law permit the establishment of “vocational skills education training centers” (also called “education centers”) to “carry out antiextremist ideological education.” Minors are prohibited from receiving religious education or participating in religious activities.

The U.S. government estimates that since 2017, authorities have detained more than one million Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Hui, and members of other Muslim groups as well as some Christians in specially built internment camps or converted detention facilities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) under the national counterterrorism and regional counterextremism laws. Several human rights groups estimate the number

of individuals detained in internment camps or other facilities was higher, possibly including up to 3.5 million. The PRC government continued to cite what it called the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” to justify enacting and enforcing restrictions on religious practices of Muslims and members of non-Muslim religious minority groups. Although the government stated it had closed all “vocational skills education training centers,” international media outlets reported during the year that some centers remained open.

Media and human rights organizations reported individuals received lengthy prison sentences for personal expressions of religious identity and beliefs, such as praying, receiving religious education, or owning a Quran. There continued to be numerous reports of individuals being incarcerated, sometimes for lengthy periods of time, held under harsh conditions, physically and sexually abused, and subjected to involuntary sterilization because of their religion and ethnicity. There continued to be reports of individuals dying due to harsh prison conditions, medical neglect, and torture. Media outlets continued to report authorities detained, imprisoned, or disappeared ethnic Muslim artists and intellectuals. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academic research, and survivor accounts indicated state-sponsored forced labor, including at detention facilities, and coerced labor transfers of Uyghurs and other Turkic-Muslim minorities continued.

During his visit to the region in August, President Xi Jinping promoted the government’s ongoing policy of “Sinicizing” Islam and bringing religious doctrine in line with CCP ideology and called for stopping “illegal religious activity.” Media, academics, and NGO advocacy groups reported authorities continued to implement a variety of methods, including home inspections, to ensure families were not observing religious practices such as praying and

observing Ramadan. According to government sources, eyewitness accounts, and media reports, the government encouraged and, in some cases, required neighbors to spy on each other. Other surveillance techniques included the use of ubiquitous and increasingly sophisticated technology, as well as the government's ongoing "Pair Up and Become a Family" program, which forced Uyghurs to accept government officials and CCP members as assigned "relatives" to live in their homes. According to media reports, the government continued to close or limit worshippers' admission to mosques in the XUAR and converted some mosques into tourist attractions.

Data from 2020 (the most recent available) estimated that nearly 900,000 Uyghur children, including some preschool aged, were involuntarily separated from their families and living in boarding schools or orphanages, where they studied ethnic Han culture, the Mandarin language, and CCP ideology. In September, a UN experts panel expressed "grave concern" over the "exponential increase" in the number of state-run boarding schools and said separating Uyghur children from their families could lead to forced assimilation and "undermine their ties to their cultural, religious, and linguistic identities." The government continued to harass, threaten, and seek the forcible repatriation of Uyghurs living abroad, particularly those who spoke out against regime abuses.

Local sources reported that unequal treatment in society of Uyghur Muslims and Han Chinese continued in parallel with authorities' policy of suppressing Uyghur language, culture, and religious practices while promoting the Han majority in political, economic, and cultural life. Muslims reported severe societal discrimination in employment and business opportunities and travel.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with national government officials to advocate the human rights of Uyghur Muslims and members of other Muslim and non-Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. The U.S. government used a variety of diplomatic and economic measures to promote religious freedom and accountability in Xinjiang, including sanctions, visa restrictions, controls on exports and imports, and a business advisory to raise awareness among U.S. companies of the risks of doing business in the region. Throughout the year, senior U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, made multiple statements condemning the PRC's atrocities and human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The embassy and consulates general delivered direct messages about religious freedom in Xinjiang through social media posts and promoted online engagement on the issue of freedom of religion or belief for members of Xinjiang's ethnic Muslim minorities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

A report on the XUAR issued during the year by the PRC Department of Population and Employment Statistics of the National Bureau of Statistics estimates the total population at 26 million. The 2020 census states Uyghurs, along with Kazakhs, Hui, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and members of other predominantly Muslim ethnic minority groups constitute approximately 15 million individuals, or 58 percent of the total population. According to the report, 12 million of these are Uyghurs. The largest segment of the remaining population is Han Chinese (11 million, or approximately 42 percent of the population), with additional groups including Mongols, Tibetans, and others constituting less than 1 percent. Uyghurs are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim. The *Globe and Mail* newspaper reported in 2019 that, according to sources in the region, Uyghur and Han Chinese Christians likely number in the thousands.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution, which cites the leadership of the CCP and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping Thought, states citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief,” but it limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities” without defining “normal.” It states religion may not be used to disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system. The constitution provides for the right to hold or not to hold a religious belief and declares that state organs, public organizations, and individuals may not discriminate against citizens “who believe in or do not believe in any religion.” The constitution states, “Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.”

Under the criminal law, the state may sentence government officials to up to two years in prison if they violate a citizen’s religious freedom, but the law does not allow individuals or groups to take legal action against the government based on the religious freedom protections afforded by the constitution.

The government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Regulations require religious organizations to register with the government. Only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations are permitted to register, and only registered groups may legally hold worship services. The CCP is responsible for creating religious regulations and oversees the United Front

Work Department (UFWD), which in turn manages religious affairs through the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). The SARA is responsible for implementing the CCP's regulations on religious affairs and administers provincial and local bureaus of religious affairs.

The 2020 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups regulate the organization, function, offices, supervision, projects, and economic administration of communities and groups at the national and local levels. The measures state that only registered groups may operate legally and stipulate that religious organizations must support the leadership of the CCP, adhere to the direction of Sinicization, and implement the values of socialism. Additional administrative measures require all clergy to pledge allegiance to the CCP and socialism, "resist illegal religious activities and religious extremist ideology, and resist infiltration by foreign forces using religion." The measures also provide that "entrance to religious places of worship should be regulated through strict gatekeeping, verification of identity, and registration."

On September 1, revisions to the 2005 Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues took effect requiring "places of religious activity" to uphold the leadership of the CCP, implement "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era," and persist in the Sinicization of religion. The measures also stipulate that the content of sermons should both reflect "socialist core values" and be integrated with "traditional Chinese culture." Religious institutions and individuals are prohibited from using these spaces to "endanger national security, disrupt social order, [or] damage national interests." The updated measures state religious activity sites "shall integrate Chinese culture and embody Chinese style in areas such as architecture, sculpture, painting, and decoration."

They require managers of religious venues to “prevent foreign forces from using religion to infiltrate” their organization.

Measures promulgated in 2022 ban unauthorized domestic online religious content and prohibit overseas organizations and individuals from operating online religious information services in the country. The measures direct government regulators to ban content that uses “religion to incite subversion of state sovereignty, oppose the leadership of the Communist Party, undermine the socialist system, national and ethnic unity, and social stability, or advocate extremism, terrorism, national separatism, and religious fanaticism.”

The Regulations on Religious Affairs require that religious activity “must not harm national security.” While the regulations stipulate religious groups must abide by the law, safeguard national unity, and respond to “religious extremism,” the term “extremism” is undefined. Measures to safeguard unity and respond to “religious extremism” include monitoring groups, individuals, and institutions, and recommending penalties such as suspending groups and canceling clergy credentials.

In addition to the national counterterrorism law, Xinjiang has its own counterterrorism and “de-extremification” laws containing similar provisions to the national law regarding “religious extremism.” These laws ban wearing long beards, full face coverings, and religious dress; expanding “halal practice” beyond food and daily prayer; and “interfering” with weddings, funerals, or inheritance, among other provisions. The law limits the information that may be released to the public following any incident authorities define as a terror attack. Other XUAR regulations also prohibit veils that cover the face, homeschooling children, “abnormal beards,” practicing religion in government buildings, and wearing clothes associated

with “religious extremism.” These regulations do not define “abnormal” or “religious extremism.”

XUAR religious affairs regulations prohibit “the use of religion” to obstruct family planning, and the XUAR 2017 Regulation on De-extremification provides that “deliberately interfering with or undermining the implementation of family planning policies” as one of the 15 “primary expressions” of religious extremism.

Regional regulations implementing the national counterterrorism law permit the establishment of “vocational skills education training centers” (which the government also calls “education centers” and “education and transformation establishments”) to “carry out antiextremist ideological education.” The regulations stipulate that “institutions such as vocational skills education training centers should carry out training sessions on the common national language, laws and regulations, and vocational skills, and carry out antiextremist ideological education, and psychological and behavioral correction to promote thought transformation of trainees and help them return to the society and family.”

Authorities in the XUAR have defined 26 religious activities as illegal without prior government authorization. Regional regulations stipulate no classes, scripture study groups, or religious studies courses may be offered by any group or institution without prior government approval. No religious group may carry out any religious activities, including preaching, missionary work, proselytizing, and ordaining clergy, without government approval. Regional regulations also ban editing, translation, publication, printing, reproduction, production, distribution, sale, and dissemination of religious publications and audiovisual products without authorization.

Xinjiang officials require minors to complete nine years of compulsory public education before they may receive religious education outside of school. National and Xinjiang-specific regulations also forbid minors from participating in religious activities and impose penalties on organizations and individuals who “organize, entice, or force” minors to participate in religious activities. A local regulation further prohibits any form of religious activity in Xinjiang schools and stipulates parents or guardians who “organize, lure, or force minors into religious activities” may be stopped by anyone and reported to police. Xinjiang’s regional version of the national Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency Law states children affected by ethnic separatism, extremism, and terrorism, or committing offenses that seriously endanger society but do not warrant a criminal punishment, may be sent to “specialized schools for correction” at the request of their parents, guardians, or the school.

Xinjiang regulations on “public safety” passed in 2022 call for a “crackdown” on “ethnic separatist forces, violent terrorist forces, religious extremist forces, and other illegal and criminal activities that endanger national security...” The regulations also call for “controlling illegal religious activities, illegal religious propaganda materials, and illegal religious network dissemination in accordance with the law and continuing to promote deradicalization.” The regulations reference *xie jiao* (heterodox teachings) and state that authorities will “carry out anticult [i.e., anti-xie jiao] propaganda and education, prevent and crack down on various cult organizations, and effectively educate and reform individuals involved in cults.” They also call for full implementation across the entire XUAR of a grid system of social surveillance that had previously been used only in certain parts of the region.

## **Government Practices**

## **Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement**

According to multiple human rights NGOs and academic sources, authorities held more than one million Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Hui, and members of other Muslim groups, as well as some Christians in a vast network of camps since 2017. Many camps were reportedly colocated with factories, where sources said detainees were subjected to forced labor and “re-education.” Several human rights groups estimated the number of individuals interned to be up to 3.5 million. The government continued to use detentions to implement a XUAR-specific counterextremism policy that identified “extremist” behavior (including growing beards, wearing headscarves, praying, and abstaining from alcohol) in concert with the National Counterterrorism Law, which contains provisions on “religious extremism.”

According to media and NGO reports, the central government and XUAR authorities continued to cite what they called the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” as justification to enact and enforce restrictions on religious practices of Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Hui, and members of other Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups.

Current data on precise numbers of detention centers and internment camps in use during the year were unavailable, although the Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s Xinjiang Data Project satellite analysis indicated that in prior years, the government operated 385 detention centers, and the NGO Xinjiang Victims Database reported that at one time there were between 50 and 100 prison facilities in the region, housing hundreds of thousands of inmates. Some reporting stated that a portion of previously operating camps had closed. For example, Sky News reported in May that, of 14 former re-education centers visited by its reporters, 13 appeared no

longer to operate as detention camps. But while authorities stated internment camps described as “vocational skills education training centers” had closed after their inhabitants “graduated,” in September, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported that reporters visiting 26 alleged camps found that at least 10 continued to operate. Police guarding the facilities told AFP reporters attempting to access the camps that they were “prisons” and “restricted areas” and that nothing could be photographed or filmed. Other sites appeared abandoned or converted into other uses. An academic at Canada’s Simon Fraser University told AFP it was probable that authorities had sent “several hundred thousand” Uyghurs to work in “high-security industrial parks.”

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported in September that many detention facilities remained open and that Uyghurs continued to be held for alleged crimes that authorities had not fully explained. RFA sources confirmed that Uyghurs continued to be sent to a detention facility in Kashgar (Mandarin: Kashi) Prefecture, and that another in Korla (Kuerle) City in Bayingolin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture continued to operate. A security officer in a village in which a camp was located told RFA detainees were “continuously coming in.”

In May, the media outlet Real Clear Politics published accounts from several individuals whom the government had detained in Xinjiang. One ethnic Kyrgyz Christian described the cell in which he and several others were held to a reporter: “The walls were 18 inches thick. Exactly. Reinforced concrete. I believe it has a metal frame inside. The cell doors are thick like that too, just a few inches less, but they are metal... Each door has eight electronic locks: two to each side, top, bottom.... Everything they did was about preventing escape.”

There continued to be numerous reports of individuals being incarcerated, sometimes for lengthy periods of time, held under harsh conditions, physically and sexually abused, and subjected to involuntary sterilization. Many individuals disappeared in prior years but relatives only learned what happened to them during the year. Some ethnic Uyghur and Kazakh individuals who had been held in detention facilities managed to emigrate abroad during the year, where they were able to speak with human rights NGOs and journalists about their experiences. Local observers continued to say that many incidents related to abuses or pressure on Uyghurs and other Muslims went unreported to international media or NGOs due to government restrictions on the flow of information. A Korla source told RFA in December 2022 that the health of inmates incarcerated in city prisons had deteriorated due to low-quality food, the intensity of prison labor, long political study sessions, and endless interrogations.

During the year, RFA reported on multiple deaths in prison that occurred in prior years but were not previously known of persons accused of religious crimes. In July, RFA reported Tumshuq Prison authorities in Maralbeshi County, Kashgar Prefecture, released the bodies of at least 26 Uyghur inmates to their families before the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Among them was the body of Uyghur Memettursun Metniyaz, a motorcycle repairman whom authorities imprisoned in 2017 after he completed the Hajj. According to a Marabelshi resident, many of the deceased died due to starvation because they fasted during the day in secret for Ramadan and could not eat after sunset due to prison rules. In August, RFA reported that 71-year-old Uyghur Abdursul Memet died of hypertension in prison in Kashgar Prefecture while serving a 14-year sentence for “illegal religious activities.” Authorities reportedly arrested Memet in 2017 for studying the Quran as a child, maintaining a beard, and performing *namaz* (daily prayers). In December 2022, RFA reported that Omar Huseyin, the former preacher of Qarayulghun

Mosque in Korla City arrested in 2017 after returning from a government-approved pilgrimage to Mecca, died in prison in February 2022 of liver cancer while serving a five-year sentence. He was reportedly healthy before his imprisonment.

In March, RFA reported that Uyghur Ilham Rozi, a former CCP propaganda official, died five days after being released from prison because he was gravely ill. Prior to his arrest, Rozi was reportedly healthy. Authorities arrested Rozi in 2019 despite his position with the party, charged him with separatism, and sentenced him to 15 years in prison for inviting prominent Uyghur scholars to give lectures in the early 2010s, according to the Norway-based NGO Uyghur Hjelp. Many of the scholars Rozi invited to give lectures were themselves sentenced after 2017.

In October, RFA reported that imprisoned Uyghur Mexmutjan Memet, a former Korla City agricultural bureau official, was in critical condition with liver and heart disease due to poor conditions. Memet moved to Turkey in 2015 but authorities arrested him in Xinjiang when he returned for a visit in 2016. In 2017, authorities sentenced him to 20 years in Korla Prison for violating the government's family planning policies, providing religious education to his children, and traveling to Turkey. Memet's wife said he had been in good health prior to his arrest.

The NGO Dui Hua Foundation reported in September that as many as 300 Uyghur intellectuals had been detained, arrested, and imprisoned since 2016. Sources reported many prominent figures remained in prison. These included Uyghur scholars Ilham Tohti, Rahile Dawut, Hushtar Isa, retired Uyghur medical doctor Gulshan Abbas; and Uyghur entrepreneur Ekpar Asat. In September, the Dui Hua Foundation confirmed that Dawut, a professor of Uyghur folklore and traditions at Xinjiang University College of

Humanities, was serving a life sentence for “endangering state security” and “splittism,” with a supplemental sentence of deprivation of political rights for life.

RFA reported that Uyghur educator, researcher, and poet Abduseit Rozi from Atush City, Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, whom authorities arrested in 2017, died in prison on August 31. Authorities told the family he died of an illness but refused to release the body to the family. Uyghur Hjelp said he became ill due to physical and mental torture.

In March, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention determined that authorities continued to arbitrarily detain Gulshan Abbas and Ekpar Asat, in addition to Qurban Mamut, former editor in chief of the Uyghur journal *Xinjiang Civilization* who RFA in 2022 said was serving a 15-year sentence for “political crimes.” The working group said it was “concerned about the total secrecy that appears to surround the fate and whereabouts of Mamut, Asat, and Abbas. Their families were unable to establish the exact details of their arrests, of the proceedings and/or trials against them and of their current whereabouts.”

The *Guardian* newspaper reported in November that Uyghur filmmaker Ikram Nurmehmet said during an October 27 trial that officers held him in a dark room for 20 days, physically tortured him, and forced him to give a false confession. An associate director of the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) told the *Guardian* that China’s law against confessions obtained under duress “does not actually function in practice.” Authorities arrested Nurmehmet at his home in Beijing in May and brought him to Urumqi, where he remained in detention at year’s end, accused of organizing “terrorist” and “separatist” activities. Nurmehmet’s mother said he faced up to eight years’ incarceration if convicted.

RFA reported in February that the whereabouts of ethnic Kazakh musician and human rights activist Zhanargul Zhumatai remained unknown. Authorities forcibly removed her from her mother's residence in Urumqi weeks after she made critical remarks to RFA about state appropriation of ethnic Kazakh herding communities' land. In January, Zhanargul had expressed to other media outlets, including the online human rights magazine *Bitter Winter*, that she feared authorities would force her into a "psychiatric hospital," an increasingly common form of disappearance and detention authorities used for government critics. Zhanargul said authorities held her in a detention center from 2017 to 2018 for "re-education" and "vocational training" after she refused to apologize for saying the government failed to properly compensate herders for appropriated land. While in detention, Zhanargul said officials forced her to write a confession detailing her "extremist thoughts" and injected her with unknown substances that caused her to fall ill.

In August, AFP reported authorities disappeared Abduqahar Ebeydulla, a village imam, in 2016 after summoning him to Yarkant County, Kashgar Prefecture, for questioning. His family subsequently learned that authorities sentenced him to 15 years in prison for "religious crimes." His family told AFP, "Abduqahar never did anything bad, certainly not anything illegal." AFP stated, "China has never disclosed the identities of most people it allegedly incarcerated" and said many individuals remained unaccounted for.

In 2022, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released an assessment of the situation in Xinjiang in which it stated authorities sexually abused prisoners in detention centers. According to the report, "Allegations were also made [by former detainees] of instances of sexual and gender-based violence ... including of rape, which also appear

credible and would in themselves amount to acts of torture or other forms of ill-treatment. The government's blanket denials of all allegations, as well as its gendered and humiliating attacks on those who have come forward to share their experiences, have added to the indignity and suffering of survivors."

The OHCHR assessment described survivor accounts of sexual and gender-based violence, including prisoners "having been forced by guards to perform oral sex in the context of an interrogation and various forms of sexual humiliation, including forced nudity. The accounts similarly described rapes taking place outside the dormitories, in separate rooms without cameras. In addition, several women recounted being subject to invasive gynecological examinations, including one woman who described this taking place in a group setting which 'made old women ashamed and young girls cry.'"

There were reports authorities detained XUAR residents around politically sensitive events. In October, RFA reported that police, citing security concerns, arrested 44 Uyghurs from Siyek village in Keriye County, Hotan Prefecture, and eight Uyghurs from Terim village in Peyziwat County, Kashgar Prefecture, in advance of National Day celebrations marking the 74th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. RFA said that in the month leading up to the holiday, local authorities mandated residents in Siyek attend weekly political study sessions.

Media outlets reported authorities continued to detain Uyghurs who had contacts with relatives living abroad. In an August report titled *Targeted in Türkiye: China's Transnational Repression Against Uyghurs*, Safeguard Defenders said, "Uyghurs who live overseas have either lost contact with

family members back home or are too afraid to reach out in case such contact puts their family members at risk.”

NGOs, scholars, and survivor accounts indicated state-sponsored forced labor and coerced labor transfers of Uyghurs and other Turkic-Muslim minorities continued. In April, the Helena Kennedy Centre at Sheffield Hallam University published a report titled *Forced Labor in the Uyghur Region: The Evidence*. The report stated that government labor transfer programs had increased in scale, with companies in the region and around the country continuing to accept “surplus laborers.” According to the report, “As the Chinese government works to make the repressive apparatus of the state less visible (by removing walls around camps, fencing around shopping centers, cameras, etc.), forced labor increasingly becomes the fulcrum through which the government maintains control over the minoritized populations in the region and continues its genocidal practices. Forced labor in the Uyghur region facilitates the forcible migration of people, the separation of families, mass surveillance, land expropriation, cultural erasure, militarized discipline, and religious persecution.” The report said the government’s desire to control perceived threats, societal racism against Uyghurs and other Muslims, government ideology, and the desire for low or unpaid labor contributed to “an enormous and multifaced system of forced labor in the Uyghur region.”

Research by academic Adrian Zenz of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation concluded agricultural labor transfer programs continued at significant scale through at least 2022 and had been slated to continue through 2025 in provincial government planning documents. Zenz told RFA in May that by elevating “poverty alleviation” to a political, rather than merely economic, task, the government was able to tie forced labor to its antiterrorism policy. The government viewed Uyghurs’ perceived “idleness”

as a national security risk, and, according to Zenz, “this urgency creates a very strong level of coercion.”

In October, the NGO Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS) published a report titled *Fractured Veins: The World’s Reliance on Minerals from the Uyghur Region*. In it, C4ADS stated that the government made corporations in the region, including many mining companies, complicit with forced labor and cultural assimilation programs, and said, “The expansion of mineral extraction in the Uyghur region hinders efforts to eliminate minerals tainted by forced labor from global supply chains.”

In July, RFA reported that the Wanhe Garment Company in Maralbexi County, Kashgar Prefecture, had an agreement with the local high school to employ 90 girls between the ages of 16 and 19 to work in its factory 14 hours per day, seven days per week. The girls lived on a compound at the factory. According to RFA, the girls were not allowed to leave or refuse to work, and their parents were not allowed to object. When four girls secretly left the factory during Ramadan to go home, factory officials went to their village and threatened to send their parents to “re-education” camps if the girls did not return.

According to the OHCHR’s 2022 assessment, Xinjiang’s official birth rate sharply declined starting in 2017 following government implementation of a new family planning policy that limited the number of children couples could have, regardless of ethnicity, to two in urban areas and three in rural areas. The report stated, “Although the policies in XUAR have appeared nominally consistent with the government’s broader approach to population planning, it appears they are linked to an expansive notion of religious ‘extremism’, raising further concerns about discriminatory enforcement of these policies against Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim minorities.”

According to the OHCHR, the government, in regional and county-level regulations as well as in documents such as its 2021 white paper, “Xinjiang Population Dynamics and Data,” connected childbearing with religious extremism and family planning with counterextremist measures.

The OHCHR assessment concluded there were “credible indications of violations of reproductive rights” in the region through the government’s “coercive enforcement of family planning policies since 2017.” It stated predominately Uyghur areas saw the steepest declines in birth rates after 2017, with official statistics noting a sharp increase in sterilizations and intrauterine device (IUD) placements in the region at the same time. According to the OHCHR, the sterilization rate in Xinjiang was 243 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018, compared with 32.1 per 100,000 inhabitants in the country overall. Several Uyghur and ethnic Kazakh women told the OHCHR that authorities conducted forced birth control, in particular forced IUD placements and possible forced sterilizations. The women also said they were forced to have abortions after reaching the permitted number of children under the family planning policy. The OHCHR stated it found these first-hand accounts credible, and noted government documents indicating women who violated the family planning policy were also sent to re-education centers.

On August 30, the Pew Research Center published a report titled *Measuring Religion in China*. According to the report, the government in recent years “intensified the enforcement of restrictions on the number of children allowed for Uyghur Muslims and severely punished those who exceed the limit.” The report noted the birthrate in Kashgar Prefecture fell from 18.2 births per 1,000 persons in 2016 to 7.9 births in 2018 – a 57 percent decrease – and stated, “These large changes in fertility patterns coincide

with government interventions, which may have been designed to reduce growth in ethnically Muslim populations in Xinjiang.”

Women camp survivors continued to state that during their captivity authorities sterilized them against their will.

Media and NGO reporting indicated authorities continued to pressure Uyghur women to marry Han men to advance assimilation of Uyghurs into Han culture. In November, RFA reported that a company in Urumqi backed by the local government, Xinjiang My Fiancée Cultural Dissemination LLC, created a matchmaking app specifically to connect Uyghur women with Han men in other parts of the country in an effort to “carry out ethnic unity on a large scale.” Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation researcher Zenz told RFA the app was an example of the government’s attempts to decrease or dilute the Muslim population in Xinjiang and that the mass internment of Uyghur men had led to a dearth of eligible Uyghur partners for women.

## **Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression**

Reports from human rights NGOs and religious groups, as well as government statements, indicated officials continued efforts to Sinicize religious doctrine and practice for the five officially recognized religions. In its report August 30 report *Measuring Religion in China*, the Pew Research Center said the government’s Sinicization policy “requires religious groups to align their doctrines, customs, and morality with Chinese culture. The campaign particularly affects so-called “foreign” religions – including Islam as well as Catholicism and Protestantism – whose adherents are expected to prioritize Chinese traditions and to show loyalty to the state.”

Speaking to Xinjiang officials and CCP members on August 26, President Xi called for “deepening and advancing” the Sinicization of Islam, along with “effectively handling all types of illegal religious activity.” Xi’s comments followed Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Ma Xingrui’s statement in 2022 calling for the CCP to promote “the Sinicization of Islam in the interpretation and teaching of scripture” and to “actively guide the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society.”

## **Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others**

In its report *The State of the World’s Human Rights 2022/23*, published in March, Amnesty International said, “the continued persecution of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and those from other predominantly Muslim ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang threatened to erase both their religious and cultural identities.”

The OHCHR’s 2022 assessment detailed numerous restrictions on religious activities in the region. According to the OHCHR, the government used the overly broad counterterrorism law to target Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups for lawful religious practices by creating an environment “in which religious or cultural practice or expression is conflated with ‘extremism.’”

In July, RFA reported the government continued the “Pair Up and Become a Family” program in which more than one million CCP officials from other parts of the country lived part time with local families in Xinjiang, who were required to accept this arrangement. RFA said Han Chinese “relatives” put pressure on families to drink alcohol and eat pork in violation of Islamic dietary laws.

RFA reported in March and April that authorities continued to ban Uyghurs and other Muslims, including civil servants, teachers, and students, from fasting during Ramadan, with police questioning children on their parents' adherence to the ban and authorities relying on extensive networks of informants, which included residents and neighborhood committees, to detect noncompliance. Officials did not allow individuals over the age of 65 to observe the holiday, unlike in 2021-22, when elderly persons were allowed to do so. According to RFA, during the first week of Ramadan in March, police in Turpan City interrogated 56 Uyghurs about their activities and determined that 54 had broken the law by fasting. According to World Uyghur Congress spokesperson Dilshat Rishit, authorities also instituted "a round-the-clock monitoring system," including random home inspections, in 1,811 villages to prevent Ramadan fasting. In April, at the holiday's conclusion, RFA reported authorities banned most Uyghurs from praying in both mosques and their own homes during Eid al-Fitr, with police patrolling city streets to deter prayer. Authorities allowed only persons who were 60 and older to pray in a local mosque under police surveillance.

In July, RFA reported that regional authorities held a 100-day "strike hard" campaign targeting a range of illegal activities, including any gathering of more than 30 persons and "stirring up trouble." Religious ceremonies held without prior authorization from the authorities, their neighborhood committee, or the police were targeted as illegal gatherings. A police officer told RFA, "While some individuals may attend gatherings with good intentions, there are others who may have ulterior motives ... if any participant engages in discussions or activities involving forbidden matters, all individuals present at the gathering will face consequences." The campaign coincided with the anniversary of the 2009 protests in Urumqi.

In July, local police told RFA that Muslims were not permitted to read or discuss the Quran except in the presence of a government-assigned imam. According to Bekzat Maksutkhan, head of the Kazakhstan-based rights group Atajurt, on July 14, police in Jimsar County, Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, arrested Kusman Rehim, an ethnic Kazakh, for performing Quranic recitations during Eid al-Adha, taking part in a Muslim wedding, and possessing a Quran in his home. Regional authorities banned recitations of the Quran in 2017.

SARA regulations stating only the Islamic Association of China was permitted to organize Muslims' pilgrimage trips remained in effect. These regulations stated that those who applied to join the Hajj must be "patriotic, law abiding, and have good conduct," must have never participated in the Hajj, and must oppose religious extremism.

The government continued to control the administration of mosques and restrict access to houses of worship, requiring worshipers to apply for mosque entry permits.

According to human rights groups and international media, in addition to the government's Integrated Joint Operation Plan (IJOP) big data collection program, Xinjiang authorities continued to maintain extensive and invasive security and surveillance, in part to gain information regarding individuals' religious adherence and practices. Human rights groups said surveillance was more severe in parts of the country where religious minorities predominated, including the XUAR, compared with other parts of the country with ethnic Han Chinese majorities, due to the connection between religion and the ethnic and cultural identities of these groups. During the year, the government extensively used mobile phone apps, cameras, and other electronics to monitor all speech and movement. Authorities

employed a comprehensive database that tracked the movements, mobile app usage, and even electricity and gasoline consumption of inhabitants in the region.

In May, HRW reported that police in Xinjiang maintained a list of 50,000 multimedia files deemed “violent and terrorist” that they used, in combination with mandatory monitoring apps that scanned audio and video files on mobile phones, to flag Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims for interrogation. Many designated files were representations of common religious materials, including readings of every chapter of the Quran. Police identified individuals by comparing the list against data received from two apps – known as Jing Wang Wei Shi and Feng Cai – that authorities required residents of Urumqi to have on their mobile phones. HRW said Uyghurs could trigger a police interrogation just by storing the Quran on their phone.

According to media reports, the Ministry of Public Security used tens of millions of surveillance cameras throughout the country to monitor the general public. Human rights groups stated authorities increasingly relied on the cameras and other forms of surveillance to monitor and intimidate political dissidents, religious leaders and adherents, Tibetans, and Uyghurs. These included facial recognition and “gait recognition” video surveillance, allowing police not only to monitor a situation but also to quickly identify individuals in crowds.

The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) reported in October that Xinjiang authorities continued to use state-owned technology company Hikvision’s facial recognition cameras and state-subsidized Dahua’s facial recognition cameras as part of the IJOP to carry out widespread surveillance against Uyghurs, installing them “in and around internment camps, schools, and mosques in the Uyghur Region.” The physical security technology firm IPVM

reported in October that Hikvision's latest software update included minority-detection technology, despite Hikvision's assertion that it phased out this technology in 2018. IPVM said, "there is a strong risk Uyghurs are the intended target."

UHRP reported in December that Xinjiang had more than twice as many civilian police as elsewhere in the country, and possibly twice as many paramilitary People's Armed Police mobile detachments as Beijing, despite their comparable populations.

According to government documents, Han Chinese officials also continued to implement an in-person surveillance system in which teams of six – composed of police or local officials and one Uyghur language speaker – went to each house and compiled information on occupants. Since the program began in 2014, more than 200,000 cadres from all levels of the government were deployed to more than 8,500 villages. The teams reported on "extremist" behavior, such as abstaining from alcohol, fasting during Ramadan, and wearing long beards. They reported on the presence of "undesirable" items, such as Qurans, or occupants' perceived propensity for "extremist" ideology.

Government demolition of mosques continued under a campaign called "mosque rectification" that began in 2016. The 2022 OHCHR assessment stated, "Alongside the increasing restrictions on expressions of Muslim religious practice are recurring reports of the destruction of Islamic religious sites, such as mosques, shrines, and cemeteries ... several researchers, predominantly based on detailed analysis of publicly available satellite imagery, consider that a large number of mosques have been destroyed in XUAR over the last years. This trend has also been reported by investigative journalists who have visited the region and compared satellite images with

the current physical conditions of the geographic sites in question.” The OHCHR said the government consistently denied improperly altering or destroying religious sites, saying instead that mosques were “in disrepair and being reconstructed for safety reasons.”

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute reported in 2020 that since 2017, at least 16,000 mosques in the region had been damaged or destroyed as a result of government policies. This represented approximately 65 percent of all mosques. RFA reported in July that some mosques remained intact but were closed by authorities. Several prominent mosques remained open but under surveillance. RFA said the historic Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, mostly closed for worship since 2016, had begun offering tickets to tourists but continued to bar regular religious services. Sources told RFA that since 2016, only a small number of elderly worshippers had been allowed access to the mosque on Islamic holy days or as human props for propaganda purposes when authorities hosted foreign visitors. A Kashgar police officer said worshippers were not allowed inside the mosque unless the government organized it.

In April, *Bitter Winter* reported that authorities created a state-sponsored promotional video of Uyghur dancers dressed in Buddhist garb performing inside the Grand Kuqa Mosque in Aksu Prefecture, the second largest mosque in the XUAR. The video’s woman narrator, walking through the mosque with her head uncovered and her shoes on, encouraged viewers to remember that “Kuqa [Mosque], the people, and the religion are Chinese.” *Bitter Winter* said the video attempted to portray the mosque “as a Buddhist-Muslim religious hub inextricably bound up with Han Chinese history and culture.” Exiled Uyghur poet Aziz Isa Elkun, noting that the video was in Mandarin with Mandarin subtitles, said it was “a gross insult to our

beliefs” and also intended to mislead the broader Chinese public with a message of “assimilation, caricature, cultural tropes, and falsehood.”

The government continued to enforce laws prohibiting children younger than 18 from taking part in religious observances and traditions, including fasting during the month of Ramadan and entering mosques. Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities remained strictly prohibited by law from providing their children with any religious education at home. In its report *Measuring Religion in China*, the Pew Research Center wrote that “the strict prohibition on providing formal religious education to children may disrupt the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs and practices among Muslim-majority ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and other parts of China.”

Numerous media reports indicated the government continued to operate a network of boarding schools for ethnic minority children whose parents had been detained in Xinjiang’s internment camps. Data from 2020 (the most recent available) estimated that nearly 900,000 Uyghur children, including some preschool aged, were involuntarily separated from their families and living in boarding schools or orphanages where they studied ethnic Han culture, Mandarin language, and CCP ideology. On September 26, a UN experts panel that included Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Alexandra Xanthaki, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, and Farida Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on education expressed “grave concern” over the closure of local schools and the “exponential increase” in the number of state-run boarding schools that emphasized Mandarin-only instruction. The panel also expressed concern that separating Uyghur and other minority children, including very young children, from their families “could lead to their forced assimilation into the majority Mandarin language and the adoption of Han cultural practices... This will inevitably lead to a loss of connection with their families and

communities and undermine their ties to their cultural, religious, and linguistic identities.”

In March, RFA reported that authorities sentenced Uyghur Ayshemhan Abdulla to 21 years in prison for sending her three children to a home-based religious school. Authorities originally detained her in 2017. A source told RFA, “She is serving her prison term in Baykol Women’s Prison in Ghulja City [Yining Province]. For each child she sent [to the school], she received seven years in prison.” Authorities also held her children in a detention center for more than a year but subsequently released them.

## **Transnational Repression**

International media and NGOs reported that authorities or their representatives abroad continued to seek to forcibly repatriate Uyghur and other Muslim citizens from abroad and detained many who returned. The government continued to harass and threaten Uyghurs living abroad, particularly those who spoke out against regime abuses, including by imprisoning, detaining, or subjecting their family members in Xinjiang to exit bans. Uyghurs abroad also routinely encountered harassment when attempting to renew passports, with Chinese consular offices often pressuring them to return to China or subjecting them to invasive questioning.

## **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

Observers reported Uyghurs faced draconian restrictions on movement within and outside the region, including identification checks for individuals entering or leaving cities and on public roads. Security officials operated checkpoints managing entry into public places, including markets and

mosques, that required all Uyghurs to scan their national identity card, undergo a facial recognition check, and put baggage through airport-style security screening. Authorities did not consistently apply such restrictions to Han Chinese residents in these areas.

Uyghurs, particularly those residing in Xinjiang, reported great difficulty receiving approval for passport applications and rarely earned permission to travel abroad. In May, the NGO Safeguard Defenders published a report titled *Trapped: China's Expanding Use of Exit Bans*. The NGO stated that authorities conducted widespread passport recall campaigns in 2015 and 2016 against Uyghur residents. It also reported that in 2019, applying for a passport was among the reasons a Uyghur could be flagged for detention.

In a February report, the International Labor Organization (ILO) said there was employment-related discrimination against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The ILO urged the government to immediately cease discriminatory practices against Uyghurs, including internment or imprisonment on ethnic and religious grounds for deradicalization purposes. It also expressed “grave concern” at authorities’ efforts to impose employee “deradicalization obligations” on employers and workers’ organizations and called for the repeal of policies that “prevent enterprises and trade unions from playing their respective roles in promoting equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation without discrimination based on race, national extraction, religion, or political opinion.”

On February 3, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said, “The accusation that China has been ‘perpetrating genocide’ is nothing but an egregious lie propagated by the U.S. side. Xinjiang enjoys social stability, economic development, ethnic solidarity, religious harmony, and rising living standards.”

The *Financial Express* reported that while exchanging views with a Bangladesh media delegation on July 26, the chief imam of Kashgar Mosque said, “There are no restrictions on performing religion here. These are Western lies.” Religious Affairs Bureau deputy director general Li Jiang told the delegation, “In line with the central government's policy, we fully respect and protect citizens' religious beliefs.”

The *People's Daily* reported that during his visit to Xinjiang in August, President Xi stressed the importance of “maintaining social stability” and told local officials, “It is necessary to strengthen positive publicity and show Xinjiang’s new atmosphere of openness and self-confidence, tell the story of Xinjiang in the new era ... and refute all forms of false public opinion and negative or harmful speech.”

State media reported on a December 20 human rights symposium of 200 scholars and officials in Urumqi. It included the unveiling of a “Blue Book Report on Legal Protections for Human Rights in Xinjiang,” as well as keynote speeches from the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference’s Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee deputy director Jiang Jianguo and Xinjiang vice governor Erkin Tuniyaz. Tuniyaz said the development of human rights in Xinjiang conformed to Xinjiang’s realities, met the expectations of its people, and complied with the “basic spirit” of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Official state media continued to publish material describing members of minority ethnic or religious groups as violent or inferior. Such material emphasized the connection between Islam and acts of violence and described religious adherents as culturally backwards and less educated, and thus in need of re-education.

The government arranged visits for foreign government officials, journalists, and religious actors throughout the year. State media reported these trips were intended to enable visitors to witness “the economic and social development of Xinjiang” and show that “the people of Xinjiang are enjoying a happy life.” Critics of such visits said they were propaganda designed to obscure the government’s human rights record in the region.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Because the government and individuals closely linked religion, culture, and ethnicity, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of societal discrimination as being solely based on religious identity. Local sources continued to state that unequal treatment of Uyghurs and Han Chinese ran parallel with official suppression of Uyghur language, culture, and religion, and the promotion of the Han majority in political, economic, and cultural life. Muslims in Xinjiang continued to face discrimination in hiring, retaining their positions, and pursuing other business opportunities. Local sources continued to state it was difficult for Uyghurs to book hotel reservations for travel.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

During the year, the U.S. government used a variety of diplomatic and economic measures to promote religious freedom and accountability in Xinjiang, including sanctions, visa restrictions, controls on exports and imports, and an updated business advisory raising awareness among U.S.-based companies about the risks of doing business in Xinjiang. The

Ambassador and other embassy officials also met with national government officials to advocate the human rights of Uyghur Muslims and members of other Muslim and non-Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang.

Senior U.S. government officials made statements during the year condemning abuses against Uyghurs and other religious minorities in Xinjiang. During an address to the UN Human Rights Council on March 2, the Secretary of State cited the 2022 OHCHR assessment and said the United States remained “gravely concerned about the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity that China is committing against Muslim Uyghurs and other members of minority groups in Xinjiang.”

On March 10, speaking at the UN General Assembly High-Level Event on the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations said, “[T]he Chinese government has committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang. The international community must continue to condemn these atrocities. We must continue to demand accountability. And we must continue to call for all those unjustly detained in the PRC to be released and reunited with their families.”

On May 26, the Secretary of State, speaking at a forum at George Washington University, said, “The United States stands with countries and people around the world against the genocide and crimes against humanity happening in the Xinjiang region, where more than a million people have been placed in detention camps because of their ethnic and religious identity.”

In a December 8 statement on “Promoting Accountability in Support of the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” the

Secretary of State announced, “the Department of State today issued the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act (UHRPA) Report to Congress, while Treasury is sanctioning two People’s Republic of China (PRC) government officials, including one under UHRPA, for their connection to serious human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Concurrently, the Department of Homeland Security-led interagency Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force is announcing the addition of three PRC entities to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List.”

On December 11, on the occasion of Human Rights Day, the U.S. Ambassador to the PRC issued a statement saying, “The United States stands with countries and people around the world against the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang.”

On December 11, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Global Criminal Justice spoke at an NGO-organized event in Washington, D.C. for Uyghur Genocide Recognition Day. The Ambassador said, “today ... we recognize the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity being committed by authorities of the People’s Republic of China against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, ethnic Kyrgyz, and members of other ethnic and religious groups in Xinjiang. Today, we commemorate the dignity and acknowledge the rights of the victims and survivors of these crimes.”

On September 19, the Ambassador at Large for Global Criminal Justice spoke at an NGO-hosted event in New York on international responses to the PRC’s atrocities against Uyghurs. The Ambassador said, “While it remains challenging to create pathways to justice for the PRC’s atrocities in Xinjiang, the High Commissioner’s [2022] assessment offers a solid foundation for further actions. We should not stand idly by or be silent or bow to PRC

pressure to look away. The United States has chosen to call these atrocities by their name: crimes against humanity and genocide.”

In October, 50 countries, including the United States, issued a joint statement on human rights violations in Xinjiang at the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee. It stated, “Members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang continue to suffer serious violations of their human rights by the authorities of the People’s Republic of China .... We urge China to end its violations of human rights in Xinjiang, engage constructively with the OHCHR, and fully implement the recommendations of the [2022] assessment.”

The embassy continued to amplify Department of State religious freedom initiatives directly to local audiences through postings to the embassy website and to its Weibo, WeChat, and Twitter accounts. The embassy also issued a series of posts or retweeted messages concerning repression of religious freedom in Xinjiang.