

III: Islam

Degree of persecution:

Hui Muslims

LOW

Uighur Muslims

VERY HIGH

Trajectory of persecution:

Hui Muslims



Minor Increase

Uighur Muslims



Increase

Key findings

- 1 Revival and growth:** Islam, with about 21 million believers in China, has experienced visible expansion over the past decade. Hui Muslim communities have constructed thousands of new mosques, while many Uighurs are adopting religious practice in part to assert an independent identity from the Han Chinese majority. The influence of the ultraconservative Salafi strand of Islam has also expanded, even attracting a small number of Han converts.
- 2 Bifurcated controls:** Chinese government treatment of Muslims differs significantly across ethnic and geographic lines. Hui Muslims have much greater leeway than Uighurs to practice core elements of the Islamic faith like praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, going on the Hajj pilgrimage, or donning a headscarf. Uighurs who engage in such acts increasingly face job dismissal, fines, and imprisonment.
- 3 Under Xi:** Both Hui and Uighur Muslims have experienced intensified restrictions and Islamophobia since Xi Jinping became leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, with controls deepening and expanding in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region especially. Previously informal or local restrictions in Xinjiang—on issues such as religious dress or children's education—have been codified at the regional and national levels, and authorities have launched new campaigns to more closely monitor smartphone usage and force businesses to sell alcohol.
- 4 Increased violence:** Restrictions on religious practice and their intrusive implementation have been linked to a growing number of violent clashes or premeditated attacks by some Uighurs against police, pro-Beijing religious leaders,



A Hui mosque in Linxia, Gansu Province, also known as “Little Mecca,” where restrictions on Islam are more lax than in Xinjiang.

Credit: Wikimedia

and civilians. Central authorities have prioritized “maintaining stability,” launched a “strike hard” campaign, armed more police, and meted out harsh punishments even for peaceful religious practice. Incidents of security forces opening fire on Uighur civilians have become more common.

5 Economic incentives: The economic priorities of the Chinese government have contributed to greater repression in some circumstances, but have also encouraged government actors to invest funds in projects that promote Islam or the export of related goods. Authorities in Xinjiang make extensive use of economic rewards and punishments when enforcing controls on religion.

6 Adaptation and resistance: Hui Muslims have traditionally adapted their religious practice to Chinese thought and worked through the existing political system to influence policymaking. Many Uighurs, facing more restrictive conditions, have chosen to secretly circumvent official controls, access unapproved religious publications, privately affirm their faith, or refuse to participate in official celebrations. Others have acted more defiantly, growing beards or donning headscarves even where it is forbidden, or confronting police when they try to enforce intrusive regulations.

“After 2009, everything changed. Now the rule is, if I go to your house, read some Quran, pray together, and the government finds out, you go to jail.”

—Barna, Uighur woman from Xinjiang now living in the United States, 2015⁵

“This video [of a young Hui girl reciting Quran verses] has drawn a gasp from the public.... The Education Department of Gansu Province strongly condemns the act that harms the mental health of the youth, and demands education agencies... strictly ban religion from campuses.”

—Education Department of Gansu Province, May 2016⁶

Islam in China: Past and present

Islam first came to China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), not long after the prophet Muhammad's death, as Muslim traders arrived via the Silk Road. Under the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), some of whose leaders were themselves converts, Islam's influence and the number of Muslims in China expanded, particularly in Uighur-populated areas.³ After the CCP came to power in 1949, China's Muslims were brought under the authority of the "patriotic" Islamic Association of China (IAC), established in 1953. During the Cultural Revolution, many mosques were destroyed and any public displays of faith were fiercely suppressed and punished.⁴

Following the death of Mao Zedong, religious practice was permitted again, the IAC was reestablished, and the rebuilding of mosques and Muslim shrines was allowed. According to the 1982 Central Committee Document No. 19 on CCP religious policy, there were 10 million Muslims in China.⁵ The figure has more than doubled since then.

China's current population of 21 to 23 million Muslims outnumbers the Muslim populations in many Middle Eastern countries and features great ethnic diversity.⁶ Approximately half of China's Muslims (10.5 to 11 million) are Hui,⁷ descendants of Arab and Persian traders who have assimilated into Chinese society and culture. Their physical appearance closely resembles that of the country's Han majority, and while parts of Ningxia, Gansu, and Yunnan Provinces have high concentrations of Hui, many have settled elsewhere in China. The second-largest contingent of Muslims are Uighurs, a Turkic minority of approximately 10 million people with its own language, customs, and Eurasian appearance that is largely concentrated in the northwestern region of Xinjiang.⁸

The country's remaining Muslims are members of various Central Asian ethnic groups—including Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Tajiks—or migrants from Middle Eastern or African countries who reside in Beijing and other major cities.⁹

China is home to over 35,000 mosques, half of them in Xinjiang, and 45,000 imams dispersed across multiple provinces.¹⁰ There are important pilgrimage sites in Kashgar and Turpan in Xinjiang, as well as in Gansu Province's Linxia, a heavily Hui Muslim city that is often referred to as "Little Mecca."¹¹

This ethnic and geographic diversity is also reflected in the practice of Islam. Most of China's Muslims are Sunni, with some Uighurs also following Sufi traditions. Some practices are common to all Chinese Muslim communities, such as abstention from pork and celebration of Ramadan, but the degree to which individual worshippers pray five times a day or regularly attend Friday services at a mosque varies widely. In addition, certain practices related to marriage or funeral rites are common in Uighur areas as part of their cultural heritage, but absent among other Muslim communities. Meanwhile, a unique dimension of Hui Muslim practice is the existence of women-only mosques led by female imams.¹² Uighur women traditionally avoid attending mosque services with men, instead congregating informally in one another's homes to pray, read the Quran, and socialize, though some mosques have spaces for women to pray.¹³ The diversity of practice among Muslims in China is such that even within the same ethnic community and province, the manifestation of Islamic identity can vary significantly.¹⁴

Like other religions in China, Islam has experienced a revival over the past decade. For

many Uighurs, increased religiosity and adoption of religious symbols or attire are ways of asserting an independent identity from the Han Chinese majority. Among the Hui, people are often seeking spiritual and moral guidance in a commercialized and materialistic society, and newly affluent Muslim entrepreneurs have more resources to contribute to religious institutions. One visible sign of this revival is the growing number of newly constructed mosques and Sufi shrines even in small villages, particularly in parts of Gansu and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region that are sometimes referred to as the Quran Belt.¹⁵

A small number of Han Chinese have converted to Islam, either for spiritual reasons or to facilitate marriage to a Hui spouse. But most of those becoming more devout are rediscovering their own Islamic heritage. Government statistics do not necessarily provide an accurate tally of the country's practicing Muslim community because they are based largely on counts of ethnic minorities, embedding an assumption that all Hui or Uighurs are Muslims, and that all Muslims are not Han.¹⁶

Other factors are also fueling the Islamic revival, such as increased translation of texts from Arabic to Chinese, the rise of social media for sharing religious content, and a growing number of Dawa missionaries from the Middle East and South Asia.¹⁷

Bifurcated policy and implementation

The nature of Muslim communities' interaction with the Chinese authorities varies greatly. Non-Uighur believers encounter significantly fewer government restrictions on religious practice, attire, and media consumption than their Uighur coreligionists. Routine elements of Muslim practice that are common around the world are quite visible among Hui, but severely restricted and even criminalized for Uighurs. These include mosques using loudspeakers to summon Muslims to Friday prayers, believers fasting during Ramadan, adolescents studying at madrassas, children accompanying parents to prayers, individuals watching educational videos on Islamic teachings, or men growing beards and women wearing headscarves.

In addition, Hui government employees—including civil servants, teachers, police officers, and workers at state-owned enterprises—are permitted to openly practice their faith and wear headscarves, while for Uighurs this has become strictly forbidden. Non-Uighur Muslims are also much more likely to obtain a passport and permission to go on Hajj to Mecca, a core Islamic obligation that has become increasingly rare and difficult for Uighurs to fulfill.

Similarly, within Xinjiang, restrictions tend to be tighter and repression more violent in the region's southern prefectures (such as Aksu, Hotan, and Kashgar) than in the north. The vast majority of the population in the south is Uighur, and these areas have also been the site of more violent altercations or attacks than the north, with the possible exception of Urumqi.

After a period of relative openness and religious resurgence in Xinjiang in the 1980s, new regulations limiting religious practice emerged in the 1990s, alongside violent clashes between Uighur residents and the Chinese authorities. The tightening of religious management and the criminalization of peaceful religious activities accelerated following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. The CCP quickly expanded

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its rhetoric on security threats involving Uighurs from a focus on separatism to a campaign against the “three evil forces” of separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism.¹⁸ To date, the precise definition of “religious extremism” remains unclear, and there are numerous well-documented cases of Uighurs being harshly punished for seemingly benign religious or educational activities that the government arbitrarily labels “extremist.”

A second watershed moment for Chinese government relations with Uighur Muslims occurred in July 2009. On July 5, police forcibly suppressed a peaceful demonstration in Urumqi by Uighurs voicing frustration over a limited investigation into the deaths of Uighur factory workers in a brawl with Han employees in southern China.¹⁹ The police action—which according to Amnesty International included the use of tear gas and live ammunition against crowds of peaceful protesters—sparked an outbreak of violence between Uighurs and Han residents.²⁰

State-run media reported that 197 people were killed, but the details of events that day could not be fully verified due to tight government control of information and the intimidation of witnesses. The July 5 clashes were followed by a harsh crackdown that included large-scale “disappearance,” imprisonment, and execution of Uighurs in questionable legal proceedings, and an almost complete shutdown of internet access in the region for ten months.²¹ Seven years later, hundreds of young Uighur men who were detained in the aftermath remain unaccounted for.²²

Islam under Xi Jinping

When Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP in November 2012, the space for peaceful religious practice or other expressions of Uighur Muslim identity had already shrunk considerably in the years since July 2009. By contrast, Hui Muslims enjoyed significantly greater leeway to practice core elements of their Islamic faith. Under Xi, both groups have experienced intensified restrictions, though the gap in treatment between Hui and Uighur Muslims remains wide.

The period since November 2012 has also featured an increase in violent attacks by Uighurs against police officers, symbols of official authority, fellow Uighurs who are seen as government collaborators (including religious leaders), and civilians. Several incidents have occurred in areas outside Xinjiang, most notably a March 2014 stabbing attack at Kunming train station in Yunnan Province that left at least 29 people dead.²³

Codification and tightening in Xinjiang

State control over Uighurs’ religious practice in Xinjiang has grown substantially since 2009, and the trend has only deepened and expanded under Xi. A wide range of routine and peaceful aspects of religious observance that were once permissible have been arbitrarily labeled as “illegal religious activities” or “religious extremism.”

One key feature of this pattern has been a shift toward codification. Since November 2012, the Chinese government has adopted laws and regulations that formalized local practices on restricting or punishing religious behavior. This is consistent with Xi’s broader effort to “rule by law.” The new measures have included national counterterrorism legislation that took effect in January 2016,²⁴ Xinjiang Religious Affairs Regulations that took effect in January 2015,²⁵ and Urumqi regulations on religious attire that took effect in February 2015.²⁶

While the replacement of informal political directives with written laws could be a positive

development in theory, the trend has been problematic in practice. The provisions' vague wording has done little to restrict abusive and expansive interpretations of terms like "terrorism," "separatism," and "religious extremism," and their regional or national application has broadened the reach of certain rules that were once fairly localized. Meanwhile, the stricter legal environment and a "strike hard" campaign launched in May 2014 have increased pressure on local officials to enforce oppressive rules that they might otherwise implement laxly.²⁷

The new legislation and additional informal directives have affected a wide array of Uighur religious practices:

- 1. Religious attire and appearance:** Under Xi, a campaign to discourage Uighur women from covering their faces or even heads and men (particularly young men) from growing long beards has intensified, expanded, and become more formalized. Previously, prohibitions on religious dress were enforced unevenly through local directives with no basis in law.²⁸ Today, signs in public places like hospitals, libraries, and banks explicitly deny service to veiled women and bearded men. In August 2014, city authorities in Karamay announced that such individuals would be barred from public transportation during a 14-day sporting event.²⁹ In January 2015, the Urumqi government announced a prohibition on "wearing items that mask the face or robe the body."³⁰ Government workers or university students who defy such bans risk dismissal or expulsion.

During Ramadan, authorities have launched programs requiring people to physically exert themselves to discourage fasting.

Police increasingly approach women to enforce the rules, search homes based on informant tips, and fine violators. In at least one case, a Kashgar man was sentenced to six years in prison for refusing to shave his beard, and his wife was given a two-year term for retaining her veil.³¹ In an example of the ambiguity surrounding even codified restrictions, scholars James Liebold and Timothy Grose note that it remains unclear exactly which garments are prohibited, though the rules appear to include popular head coverings as well as more conservative burqas.³² Veils and beards grew more common from 2009 to 2013, but as a result of the regulations, many fewer Uighurs appear to be expressing their religious identity in this way.

- 2. Ramadan:** Restrictions on Uighur fasting during Ramadan are not a new phenomenon, but have become more systematic since 2012.³³ Restaurants are required to stay open, police must monitor homes where the lights are turned on before dawn, students are forced to eat in front of their teachers, and opportunities to attend prayers are limited. Some civil servants and teachers have reportedly been forced to sign pledges affirming that they would not fast or have been "invited to tea" by security agencies to ascertain whether they were fasting.³⁴ The authorities have even launched programs requiring people to dance or otherwise physically exert themselves to discourage fasting.³⁵ These measures, which go beyond prohibitions by actually compelling individuals to perform certain actions, underscore the extreme intrusiveness of the government's religious controls.
- 3. Informal prayer:** It has become increasingly difficult—and even dangerous—to pray with other Muslims outside of a mosque. The Xinjiang Religious Affairs Regulations that came into effect in January 2015 state that religious activities can only take place in registered venues, while practice in government offices, public schools, businesses, and

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"other places" is prohibited.³⁶ In September 2015, a group of eight farmers and a local imam from a village in Aksu Prefecture were sentenced to between seven and nine years in prison for praying together in a field. One of the farmers' wives said of the trial, "I did not hear anything that indicated that these eight people committed any crimes, but only prayed together outside the government-designated mosque. The whole neighborhood was shocked [by their arrest]."³⁷

Prohibitions on unofficial prayer particularly affect Uighur women, who generally do not pray in mosques and have traditionally gathered informally at one another's homes to pray and read the Quran. Such meetings can now lead to arrest.³⁸ Unofficial preaching by lay believers and various other Uighur spiritual traditions, such as shrine festivals or wedding- and funeral-related ceremonies, are also more strictly forbidden than in the past.³⁹

- 4. Children's religious participation:** Chinese authorities have long disapproved of religious education for young Uighurs, and like other faiths in China, Islam is subject to rules that attempt to limit the religious exposure of Chinese citizens under the age of 18. Nevertheless, the new 2015 Religious Affairs Regulations in Xinjiang include the most explicit and sweeping wording to date. According to Article 37, "Minors cannot participate in religious activities." Those who violate such rules are harshly punished. In March 2015, a town in Hotan Prefecture held a public trial for 25 people who had taught or participated in private religious lessons for local children. In addition to four teachers, those tried before a crowd of 15,000 included students as young as 6 and a 60-year-old woman who sent her grandchildren to attend the classes. The punishments handed down to the group remain unknown.⁴⁰ The home of the couple that hosted the lessons was demolished.⁴¹

While limits on the religious practices above have been evident for some time and simply escalated in recent years, four other forms of repression had previously been quite rare but have occurred repeatedly since 2012.

- 1. Promoting the sale of alcohol and cigarettes:** In 2015, notices that appeared in a village in Hotan Prefecture required restaurants and supermarkets to sell "five different brands of alcohol and cigarettes" and to create "eye-catching displays" to promote the products.⁴² A local CCP cadre said this was part of a campaign to weaken religion in the area and a response to the fact that businesses had stopped selling the items since 2012 after many local residents quit smoking and drinking due to their Muslim faith. In June 2015, a village in southern Xinjiang held a beer festival and drinking competition, widely touted by state media as aiming to "squeeze the space for illegal religious promotion."⁴³
- 2. Imprisonment for media consumption:** Uighurs have long received harsh prison sentences for publishing or circulating information on religious affairs or human rights abuses. In recent years, however, a growing number of Uighurs—including teenage boys—have been harshly punished for simply consuming banned religious content, in some cases without realizing it was even forbidden.⁴⁴ In a stark example of the disparate treatment of Uighurs and Hui Muslims, some Uighurs have been detained for watching videos about Islam that were legally produced in Chinese by Hui Muslims. Such incidents are part of a

broader official sensitivity to online content as smartphones proliferate. Security checks of people's phones have become more common,⁴⁵ blanket interference with social media applications has been reported in sensitive regions like Hotan,⁴⁶ and updated Religious Affairs Regulations have incorporated references to digital media.⁴⁷

3. Excessive use of deadly force by police: On several occasions since November 2012, police have opened fire on Uighur civilians, both during clashes with protesters and while conducting house searches. The use of live ammunition has resulted in the injury or death of bystanders, including children.⁴⁸ Police have resorted to deadly force at the first sign of an altercation and in situations that would not draw such a heavy-handed response if they occurred in Han-populated areas.⁴⁹ Local tensions and further repression following such incidents often persist for years.

4. Symbolic humiliation: Many mosques have been required to fly the Chinese flag on their premises, an action that many Uighur Muslims find deeply humiliating. In at least one instance, officials positioned the flag in the direction of Mecca, creating the appearance that congregants are praying to it.⁵⁰ Similarly, while it is no longer permitted for Uighur men to engage in traditional forms of public religious dance after prayers, imams have been forced to participate in state-sponsored secular dance performances.⁵¹ During state-supported theatrical performances, the individual playing the villain often wears a costume that identifies him as a religious believer, for instance by including a long beard.⁵²

Taken together, these controls and their implementation represent a new level of state intrusion into the religious practice and daily lives of Uighurs across Xinjiang. Bans on religious dress, house searches, business interference, and extensive surveillance have expanded the range of individuals targeted, leaving few unaffected.

The result has been growing resentment and anger at the Chinese government among Uighurs, at times resulting in violence against representatives of the state and even some civilians. Such violence increased in the latter part of 2014 after the authorities launched a new "strike hard" campaign in May.⁵³ Some violent acts appear to have been spontaneous outbursts of public frustration or attempts to protect a fellow Uighur from arrest or humiliation. This seemed to be true of deadly clashes in Yarkand, near Kashgar, in July 2014. Riots and a corresponding crackdown were reportedly triggered by Uighur anger at Ramadan restrictions and security forces' killing of a family of five during a quarrel over the screening of women for headscarves in house-to-house searches.⁵⁴ Other incidents were clearly premeditated crimes. A state-sanctioned imam who headed one of the country's largest mosques in Kashgar was assassinated shortly after he expressed support for the government's actions in the Yarkand violence.⁵⁵

The Chinese authorities have argued that their policies toward Uighur Muslims are necessary as part of the battle against the "three evils," and the rise in violence in Xinjiang poses legitimate security concerns. Moreover, some restrictions—such as banning veils that cover the face—have also been adopted or considered in democratic societies. But the steps being taken by the Chinese government go far beyond what might be required for security purposes and fail to differentiate between violent attacks and peaceful religious activity.

In fact, several other considerations appear to be driving the restrictions on clearly nonviolent religious practice and their intensification since November 2012:

- **Central government emphasis on stability over development:** While some new regulations appear to be experiments by local officials, others are clearly the initiatives of central or provincial authorities. The center also sends broad signals that indirectly influence the actions of local authorities. Under Xi, it has become obvious that the top priority for the region is “maintaining stability,” meaning even economic development is of secondary importance. This represents a shift from the Hu Jintao era and is evident from a comparison of rhetoric at the May 2014 Work Forum on Xinjiang with that from the 2010 Work Forum, as well as in Xi’s own speeches.⁵⁶ Government resources have been allocated accordingly, with the public security budget for the region growing from 7.57 billion yuan (\$1.16 billion) in 2011 to 10.72 billion yuan (\$1.6 billion) in 2015, an increase of 41 percent over four years.⁵⁷
- **Bureaucratic incentives and personnel changes:** There are strong incentives for local officials to err on the side of punishing peaceful believers rather than taking the risk that a potentially violent perpetrator might slip through the cracks. Particularly during a “strike hard” campaign like the one launched in May 2014, local officials are typically given quotas for the number of “separatists,” “terrorists,” and “religious extremists” they must arrest.⁵⁸ Two other developments may have also contributed to lower quality policing and the tendency to use lethal force in recent years. Following the 2009 riots and crackdown, many Uighur police officers reportedly resigned on ethical grounds. They were reportedly replaced with less scrupulous individuals, including some who had been convicted of violent crimes.⁵⁹ In addition, as violent attacks against police increased in 2013, more officers were armed with guns and did not necessarily receive adequate training.⁶⁰
- **Efforts to reduce Uighur solidarity and communal life:** Alongside their religious significance, holidays like Ramadan, shrine festivals, and informal female prayer gatherings are opportunities for Uighurs to socialize and reinforce a sense of communal identity.⁶¹ However, the government sees such solidarity as a threat to national unity. During Ramadan, many Muslims traditionally seek to help the needy in their community, and the families facing hardship are often those with children or husbands in jail. The Chinese authorities view attempts to visit or assist them as an expression of antigovernment sentiment.⁶² Ramadan has also become politically sensitive due to its timing, which has roughly coincided in recent years with the anniversary of the July 2009 protests and crackdown. Religious dress and appearance have similarly taken on new meaning as markers of Uighur solidarity and resistance. When Uighurs see others wearing veils or growing beards, a sense of unity is reinforced.⁶³ And by reducing their visibility, local authorities hope to demonstrate to superiors that their campaign against the “three evils” has achieved results.
- **Campaign to reduce the ‘religious consciousness’ of future generations:** The Chinese authorities’ ban on religious practice and education for children under the age of 18 and heavy restrictions on religious practice among university students are essential components in a systematic effort to dilute religiosity and Uighur identity among youth, particularly those with higher education.⁶⁴ Other aspects of this effort include the proactive promotion of atheism in school textbooks and controls on the presence of devout believers among the adults who might influence young people, such as public school teachers or university professors.⁶⁵ As restrictions have intensified, devout

believers have avoided teaching positions, depriving young Uighurs of role models who are both observant Muslims and respected, law-abiding state employees.⁶⁶

Uighur Muslims living in other parts of China are not subject to the same degree of repression as their coreligionists in Xinjiang, but they often face discrimination, surveillance, or controls (particularly at universities) that do not apply to Muslims from other ethnicities. Those who take a more active part in opposing Chinese government restrictions on Uighurs, religious or otherwise, risk potentially severe reprisals. A prominent example is the case of Beijing-based scholar Ilham Tohti, who was sentenced to life in prison in September 2014. He and several of his students were jailed for their role in operating a website that promoted Uighur-Han interethnic understanding.⁶⁷

Shadows over the relative freedom of Hui Muslims

The intensified restrictions in Xinjiang and individual cases like Tohti's have increased the divergence of experience between Hui and Uighur Muslims. At the same time, Hui have not been completely spared amid the tightening of controls over religious affairs under Xi or the growing official and public anxiety about the spread of Islam and the threat of Islamist-inspired violence.

Following the knife attack in Kunming in 2014, authorities in nearby Shadian Township engaged in a crackdown on Salafi Hui Muslims that included the detention of a well-known imam.⁶⁸ During Ramadan in 2015, police were visibly deployed at mosques in Beijing.⁶⁹ And in May 2016, authorities in Qinghai launched a campaign to stem the spread of Muslim and halal signs and symbols,⁷⁰ while their counterparts in Gansu reiterated a ban on the teaching of religion in schools.⁷¹

A broader expansion of controls over religious education, including for Hui Muslims, was evident in updated amendments to nationwide Religious Affairs Regulations that were published in September 2016. One of the most noticeable changes is the addition of "schools" to the list of religious venues subject to controls in 16 of the document's 74 provisions.⁷² Meanwhile, during a July 2016 visit to Ningxia, Xi Jinping met with Muslim leaders at a local mosque and issued calls to "resolutely oppose illegal religious infiltration activities." Some observers interpreted Xi's trip and comments as a sign that party leaders are increasingly concerned about the spread of extremism among Hui as well as Uighurs.⁷³

Several factors appear to be contributing to a shift in the government's attitude toward Hui Muslims that could result in more restrictive policies:

- **Spread of Salafism:** This ultraconservative variant of Sunni Islam—often associated, fairly or unfairly, with violent extremism—has been spreading in China in recent years, enhancing government anxiety as well as concern among some Hui religious leaders. According to scholar Dru Gladney, Salafi imams have even attracted some Han Chinese converts over the past five years.⁷⁴ The number of Salafis in China is unclear, with estimates ranging from thousands to tens of thousands, making them a very small fraction of the Muslim population. Nevertheless, they have gained influence in certain communities, such as Shadian Township in Yunnan, or established their own mosques and religious schools in heavily Muslim towns like Linxia. These dynamics have increased

the political sensitivity of Chinese Muslim interactions with foreign coreligionists or organizations, particularly those from Saudi Arabia.

The increasing violence in Xinjiang and inflammatory reporting by state media have fueled anti-Islamic sentiment among Han Chinese.

- **Internal power struggles over the direction of ethnic policy:**

Although behind-the-scenes CCP debates on ethnic policy have deep roots, according to scholar James Liebold, officials promoting a more assimilationist approach have been gaining the upper hand recently. Wang Zhengwei, a Hui official from Ningxia, was suddenly dismissed in May 2016 after helping to secure political space for the construction of mosques and other elements of Islam's revival in the autonomous region.⁷⁵ Wang had also been active in advocating for passage of national legislation to regulate halal food, a step that would have helped the growing halal food export industry and reduced concerns over mislabeling. The legislation was abandoned in April 2016.⁷⁶

- **Growing anti-Islamic sentiment among Han citizens:** The increasing violence in Xinjiang, Uighur attacks in other parts of China, and inflammatory reporting by state media have contributed to a growth in anti-Islamic sentiment among Han Chinese in recent years, and those concerned often make little distinction between Muslim ethnicities. This is particularly evident in discussions on social media. During April and May 2016, numerous rumors and conspiracy theories regarding the "Muslimization" and "Arabization" of China circulated widely online without triggering censorship. These were further fueled by comments from former State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) director Ye Xiaowei, who asserted that "behind the spread of Islam there lurks a colossal menace."⁷⁷ When a 2014 video of a young female student in traditional Islamic dress reciting verses from the Quran resurfaced in May 2016, it provoked a round of Han netizen condemnation and cyberbullying of Hui bloggers, and contributed to Gansu Province's revived ban on religion in schools.⁷⁸

Key methods of political control

The Chinese authorities employ several major tactics to influence the development of Islam and reduce the opportunities for practice outside of state-supervised structures:

1. **Controlling religious leaders:** As with other religions in China, a central component of CCP attempts to control the practice of Islam is the recruitment, training, and appointment of imams. Muslims who wish to become imams must study at one of the 10 state-sanctioned Islamic institutes.⁷⁹ The curriculum reportedly includes as many courses on political education and Marxist theory as on the study of Islamic texts. Even study of the Quran is typically focused on recitation and memorization, rather than interpretation.⁸⁰ For Hui Muslims, some mosques are permitted to host unofficial seminaries where a greater emphasis is placed on comprehensive religious learning, but students who wish to preach to the public typically need to complete official seminary training as well.⁸¹ After a student has graduated, been politically vetted by the IAC and the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), and been appointed to a mosque, he continues to periodically attend political training.⁸²

In Xinjiang in particular, security personnel and undercover informants monitor imams closely. Those believed to be violating official regulations and directives—whether

by overseeing informal religious gatherings, providing private religious instruction, permitting Muslims from other townships to worship at the mosque, or failing to express sufficient support for government policies in public comments—risk dismissal, fines, or even imprisonment.

- 2. Interpreting Islamic scripture:** The Chinese government makes extensive efforts to influence the religious messages and scriptures that Muslim believers encounter. The content of sermons is dictated via regularly published leaflets, and implementation is closely monitored. The IAC and SARA have sought to parse Sharia (Islamic law) for aspects perceived to be congruent with CCP rule and Chinese nationalism,⁸³ and alter the Uighur translation of certain passages of the Quran to better match official narratives.⁸⁴ In 2013, officials reportedly disseminated compilations of state-prescribed Islamic teachings to every mosque in Xinjiang. The previous year, the IAC distributed a series of lectures to Islamic entities throughout the country.⁸⁵
- 3. Tightly managing pilgrimage:** Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has permitted a growing number of Muslims to participate in the Hajj or Umrah pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia each year, with 14,500 making the trip in 2015, according to official figures.⁸⁶ However, the authorities exercise significant control over access. Muslims are only permitted to go via IAC-organized tours, which can be costly and sometimes require bribes. Since 2006, under an agreement with the Chinese government, the Saudi authorities have granted visas only to Muslims traveling with the official pilgrimage tour, further closing off options for believers to make the trip independently.

Participation is conditioned on approval from local RAB officials and completion of “patriotic education” classes.⁸⁷ An annual quota is assigned to each province, and strong preference is given to Muslims over the age of 50. The majority of IAC spots are provided to Hui Muslims, although they complain of having to wait many years before getting a passport and space on the official tour. It has become extremely difficult for Uighurs to obtain and keep passports, and very few meet the stringent political criteria for joining the IAC group. As a result, some Uighurs have attempted to use fake passports to travel to Saudi Arabia via Turkey. In 2016, a group of 98 Uighurs was intercepted at an Istanbul airport and likely returned to China.⁸⁸

- 4. Pervasive surveillance:** The Chinese authorities impose extensive surveillance on lay Muslim believers in Xinjiang. Since 2009, the presence of security forces throughout the region has increased dramatically, with armed police becoming a routine sight in even small villages, and armored vehicles periodically patrolling the streets.⁸⁹ Over a two-month period in 2016, Urumqi alone built 949 “convenient policing stations” in a reported effort to create a “dense security net.”⁹⁰

Intrusive steps such as house-to-house searches and demands that villagers sign pledges to report instances of “religious extremism” among their neighbors have become common. There also appears to be a large-scale official effort to construct a database of so-called “religious families,” tracking which Xinjiang residents have beards, wear veils, or pray regularly.⁹¹ Human monitoring is supplemented by electronic surveillance, including close-circuit television systems in mosques, facial-recognition screening at Urumqi’s train station,⁹² and mobile police stations with video cameras. As a result, it has become

more difficult for Uighurs to practice their religion as they see fit, even in the privacy of their own homes. Surveillance is significantly more lax for the Hui population or in large cities like Beijing, where the Muslim community is more dispersed.⁹³

5. Judicial prosecutions, disappearances, and violent repression: When enforcing religious regulations in Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities have made extensive use of detentions, prosecution, and imprisonment, even to punish seemingly minor infractions. Those detained and sentenced since November 2012 range from teenage boys to middle-age imams and elderly women. The precise count of Uighur religious prisoners in Xinjiang is unclear given the lack of transparency surrounding court verdicts. However, large numbers of Uighurs have been taken into custody and prosecuted for security or criminal offenses that can include peaceful religious activities.

According to government sources cited by the Duihua Foundation, an estimated 592 Uighurs were tried on security charges in 2013–14.⁹⁴ Moreover, some 12,000 trials were held in Xinjiang during those two years for individuals accused of social order offenses that are often used to punish those who disseminate banned information, participate in peaceful protests, or challenge government bans on religious observance. In some communities, as many as one out of three families reportedly have a relative in detention.⁹⁵

Uighur Muslims detained and sentenced since November 2012 range from teenage boys to middle-age imams and elderly women.

Once in detention, Uighurs suspected of any crime, including religious offenses, are at severe risk of torture and death. One former political prisoner released in 2011 after 14 years in custody described routine beatings and long-term shackling at the Urumqi prison where he was held. He also reported witnessing numerous people beaten to death, and a high risk of disease and other health problems due to unsanitary conditions.⁹⁶ Violence and harsh treatment were sometimes meted out specifically to Uighur prisoners who asserted their Muslim faith when “tested” by prison authorities.⁹⁷

Many families, possibly hundreds, have relatives who were taken away by security forces in July 2009 or in subsequent crackdowns and whose whereabouts remain unknown years later. The increasing likelihood of extremely harsh punishment for even minor violations has generated a chilling effect as well as deep resentment among Uighurs. By contrast, such harsh treatment is exceedingly rare for Hui Muslims, and even a Salafi imam detained in Yunnan in 2015 was released without charge after 27 days in detention.⁹⁸

Economic investment, incentives, and reprisals

The economic priorities of the Chinese government have contributed to greater repression in some circumstances, but have also led government actors to invest funds in projects that promote Islam. In Xinjiang, economic development initiatives related to the \$40 billion One Belt, One Road project—designed to build transportation and infrastructural links with the rest of the Eurasian landmass—and the valuable natural resources of the region have raised the importance of “maintaining stability” there, including with respect to religious practice.

Xinjiang authorities have taken steps to promote the region’s most sacred Muslim site—Apakh Khoja Mazar Mausoleum—and smaller shrines as tourist destinations. Some foreign

scholars and Uighur observers have raised concerns that these initiatives, combined with bans on traditional shrine festivals, risk commodifying Islam and further fueling ethnic tensions.⁹⁹ In several instances, shrine management has been turned over to Han tourism companies. According to scholar Alexandre Papas, “many holy sites [in Xinjiang] now ask for an entrance fee, which the majority of local citizens just cannot afford.”¹⁰⁰

The government in Xinjiang makes extensive use of economic incentives and punishments to enforce controls on religion. Monetary rewards are routinely offered to those providing information to authorities about fellow Uighurs’ religious practice. In April 2014, a notice posted on a government website in Aksu Prefecture explained that informants could receive up to 50,000 yuan (\$8,000) for reporting on local residents who engage in any of 53 kinds of proscribed behavior. The list included 18 acts related to religious practice, such as underground preaching, praying in a public place, holding the Islamic Nikah wedding ceremony, or Ramadan fasting by certain categories of citizens (including students and civil servants).¹⁰¹

Economic reprisals include the potential loss of social benefits, dismissal from work, expulsion from universities, and fines. Social welfare payments have in some cases been conditioned on recipients signing pledges not to wear veils.¹⁰² Several of the recently adopted regulations banning religious dress or beards prescribe fines of up to 5,000 yuan (\$800) for violators or those perceived to be condoning their appearance.¹⁰³ The average monthly income in Xinjiang in 2015 was 3,300 yuan (\$530), and even less for most Uighurs, especially in rural areas.¹⁰⁴

Conditions are strikingly different in Hui areas. In Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the local government has invested billions of dollars to make the city more attractive to foreign Muslim visitors, particularly from the Middle East. Arabic has been added to street signs, and in May 2016 the Emirates airline inaugurated direct flights from Dubai.¹⁰⁵ A “World Muslim Folk Culture Street” has been built along with a lavish Hui Cultural Park, complete with an impressive golden-domed mosque that opened in 2005, though it appears to serve more as a poorly attended tourist attraction than a site of worship.¹⁰⁶ In cities like Linxia, officials have established special industrial parks for “Muslim products” that offer Hui entrepreneurs inexpensive land and low taxes. Several Hui businesses have benefited from such policies, becoming global leaders in the export of products like inexpensive Islamic headwear.¹⁰⁷

Community response and resistance

In the face of assimilationist pressures, Hui Muslims have traditionally adapted their form of Islam to Chinese thought, and some have served as senior officials. More recently, Hui representatives have worked through the political system to advance favorable legislation on issues such as halal food. Many Hui religious leaders have also adopted defensive practices to avoid provoking official persecution, distancing themselves from Salafi imams and funding mosque construction from within the community rather than accepting foreign donations. At the same time, they have engaged in active efforts to circumvent official restrictions. For example, many Hui defy limitations placed on children’s religious education, opening large numbers of madrassas and teaching even young children to recite from the Quran.

“Many holy sites [in Xinjiang] now ask for an entrance fee, which the majority of local citizens just cannot afford.”

– Scholar Alexandre Papas

Many Hui defy limitations placed on children's religious education, opening madrassas and teaching even young children to recite from the Quran.

For Uighurs, avenues of engagement like legal activism are not available given Xinjiang's judicial system, which is even more politicized than in other parts of China. Instances of public resistance, such as street protests or international exposure of abuses, are met with harsh repression. Underground religious schools and other more private initiatives can also draw violent crackdowns. Some Uighurs continue to openly ignore official restrictions, for example by wearing headscarves in forbidden public venues and choosing to pay the inevitable fine. Many others have turned to more subtle forms of resistance:

- **Secretly defying official restrictions:** Many civil servants, teachers, and students take various steps to try to visit mosques, fast during Ramadan, or pray five times a day, despite the risk of punishment if caught.¹⁰⁸ People return home during the day to pray in private, store food in their bags to be eaten at sundown, or cover the windows of their homes so as to eat undetected before sunrise. Restaurants that are required to remain open during Ramadan cook in advance and retain a minimal staff. Parents privately teach their children to read from the Quran.¹⁰⁹
- **Protest by abstention:** In recent years, a growing number of Uighurs have quit smoking or drinking alcohol and refrain when possible from participating in officially sponsored celebrations.¹¹⁰ One interviewee explained that some families have also chosen to stop dancing at private events like weddings, explaining that "our people are in a mood of mourning, such tragic things are happening. People feel it is not a time of celebration."¹¹¹ Some Uighurs have decided to treat certain official documents as "haram" (forbidden by Islam). The 2014 government notice in Aksu Prefecture cited proscribed practices including refusal to use the renminbi currency, rejecting or destroying other state documents, and avoiding applying for marriage licenses.¹¹²
- **Accessing banned information:** Many Uighur Muslims actively seek out information about Islam and local news events from unofficial sources. This can include a boarding school student searching for an unedited version of the Uighur Quran, a family gathering to watch a film about the prophet Muhammad's pivotal journey from Mecca to Medina,¹¹³ or the growing number of people who reportedly circumvent internet blocking to access Radio Free Asia reports via their mobile phones.¹¹⁴

So long as the Chinese authorities continue to conflate violent acts of terrorism with peaceful religious practice, the tensions in the region and the cycle of violence will grow worse.

These examples highlight the difficulty Chinese authorities face in trying to stamp out peaceful and routine elements of Muslim religious practice in Xinjiang, as well as Uighurs' personal and communal faith. As more officials recognize the discrete political opposition embedded in such responses, they have reacted with ever more bizarre restrictions, such as arresting people for not attending a funeral,¹¹⁵ or forcing stores to sell alcohol in areas where many residents have given up drinking.

The increased frequency of harsh punishments for benign religious activities has also put Uighur village officials, police, and others who work for the government in a deeply uncomfortable position. In interviews with overseas media since 2012, such officials have repeatedly expressed their

own surprise and confusion at the government's blatantly excessive punishments. After a farmer in Asku Prefecture was sentenced to seven years in prison in May 2016 for watching a film about Muslim migration with family members, the village security chief told Radio Free Asia: "I am having a hard time explaining these charges to the people in my village. None of this makes any sense. It is very unjust."¹¹⁶

Future outlook

There is little sign that Xi and the CCP have any intention of changing the current trajectory of official policy toward China's Muslims. On the contrary, developments in late 2016—including the transfer of Tibet's former party secretary to Xinjiang and reported plans to build even more prisons outside Urumqi—suggest that hard-line tactics will expand further. But so long as the Chinese authorities continue to conflate violent acts of terrorism with peaceful religious practice, the tensions in the region and the cycle of violence will grow worse. Under such conditions, anti-Muslim sentiment among both officials and the broader populace is likely to increase. This would inevitably affect Hui Muslims, eroding the gap in treatment between them and their Uighur coreligionists.

NOTES

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