

TARGETED IN TÜRKIYE:

China's Transnational Repression
Against Uyghurs



Targeted in Türkiye: China's Transnational Repression Against Uyghurs

© 2023 Safeguard Defenders
Cover illustration was created with the assistance of DALL·E 2
Design by Safeguard Defenders

Adapted from a research report by Yalkun Uluyol
All rights reserved

This document may not be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in whole or in part by any means including graphic, electronic or mechanical without expressed written consent of the publisher/author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in articles and reviews.

Keywords: China, Human Rights, Transnational Repression, Uyghurs, Türkiye

First published August 2023

About Safeguard Defenders

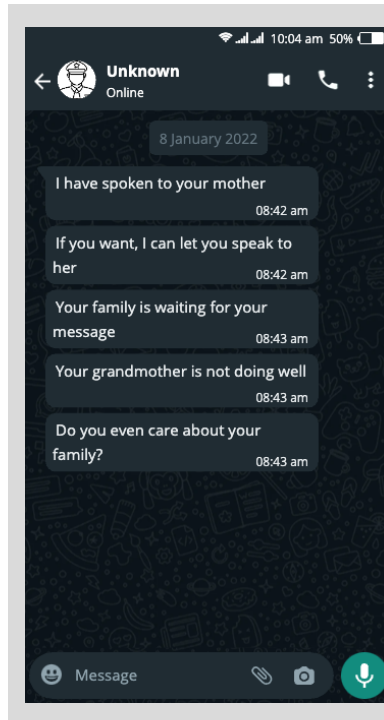
Safeguard Defenders is a human rights NGO founded in late 2016. It undertakes and supports local field activities that contribute to the protection of basic rights, promote the rule of law and enhance the ability of local civil society and human rights defenders in some of the most hostile environments in Asia.

<https://safeguarddefenders.com> | [@safeguarddefend](https://twitter.com/safeguarddefend)

TARGETED IN TÜRKIYE:

China's Transnational Repression Against Uyghurs

The People's Republic of China seeks to monitor and control Uyghurs living overseas through the use of established networks in both countries. Interviews with Uyghurs in Türkiye show that one of these networks involves police and Neighbourhood Working Groups in China and Chinese mission staff and informants in Türkiye. Leveraging intelligence gathered on Uyghurs living in Türkiye and their fear for the safety of family members back in China, Chinese police coerce or threaten them into stopping activism work; producing pro-China propaganda; and/or spying on other Uyghurs in Türkiye.

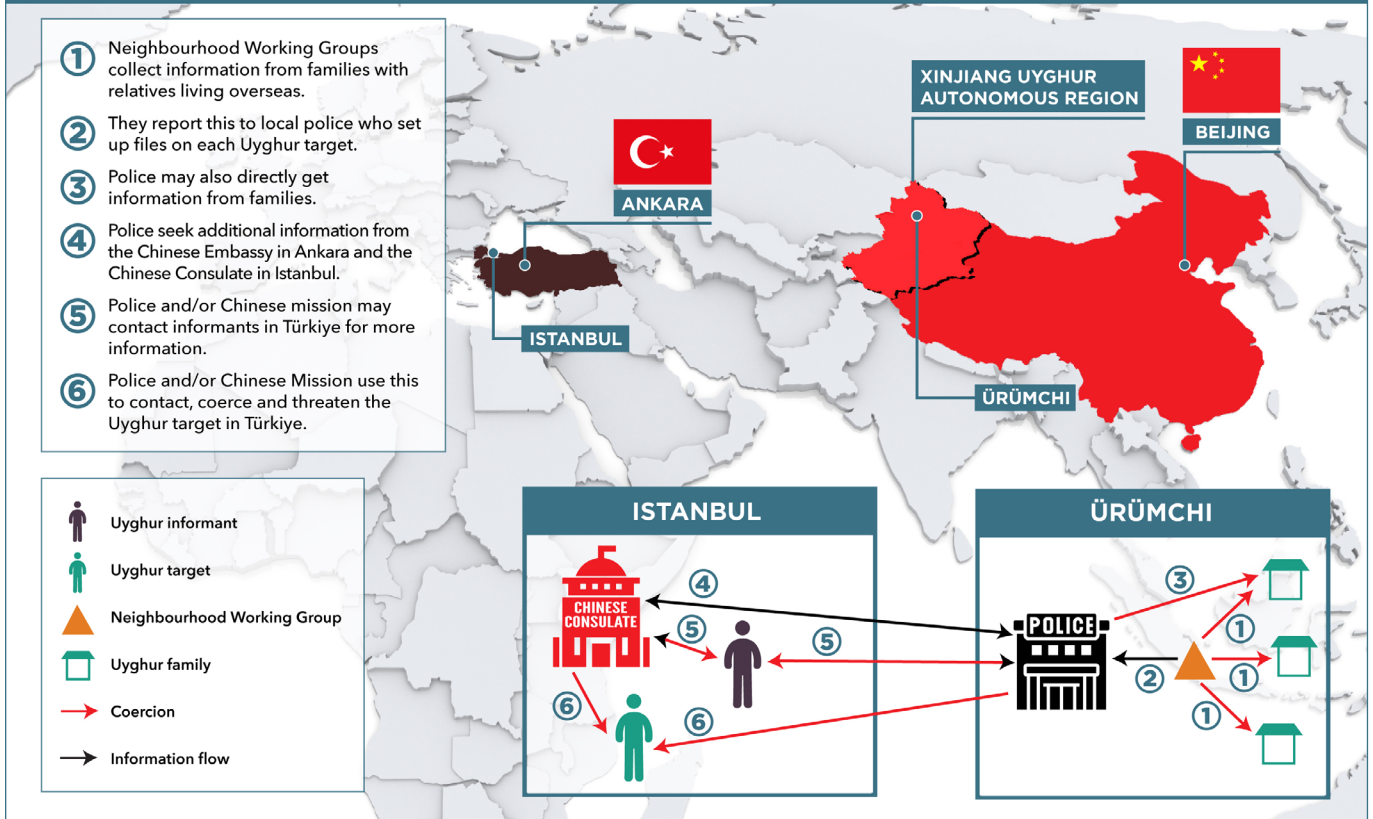


Chinese police contact Uyghurs overseas directly by phone or message or indirectly via family members or Chinese mission staff in Türkiye.

Coercive approaches used to force Uyghur targets to cooperate include:

- Threats to punish family members
- Threats to prevent passport renewal
- Offers of money

SURVEILLANCE IN SIX STEPS



These findings are based on a survey (93 respondents) and semi-structured interviews (17) with Uyghurs living in Türkiye conducted in 2022 by guest contributor Yalkun Uluylol. They are supported by many other contemporary reports on China's widespread transnational repression of Uyghurs.

All non-attributed quotes in this report come from Uyghurs who participated in this study. They have been left anonymous to protect them and their families from being punished.

The findings in this report are based on interviews with Uyghurs living in Türkiye and are consistent with results from other human rights reports focused on Uyghurs living in other countries in addition to Türkiye. Safeguard Defenders strongly discourages any member of the Uyghur diaspora in Türkiye from leaving without first having assured safe passage to a safe third country. If anyone reading this report is concerned for their safety, please email us at info@safeguarddefenders.com.

بۇ دوكلاتنىڭ يەكۈنلىرى تۈركىيەدە ياشاۋاتقان ئۇيغۇرلار بىلەن ئېلىپ بېرىلغان زىيارەتلەر ئاساسىدا ئوتتۇرىغا قويۇلدى ۋە تۈركىيە ۋە باشقا دۆلەتلەردىكى ئۇيغۇرلارنى مەركەز قىلغان ئىنسان ھوقۇقى دوكلاتلىرى بىلەن بىر دەكلىككە ئىگە. Safeguard Defenders تۈركىيەدىكى بىخەتەر ئۈچىنچى دۆلەتكە بېرىشنى خالايدىغان ئۇيغۇر دىئاسپورا ئەزالىرىغا ئىشەنچلىك يولنى جەزىملەشتۈرمەي تۇرۇپ تۈركىيەدىن ئايرىلماسلىقىنى كۈچلۈك تەۋسىيە قىلىدۇ. بۇ دوكلاتنى ئوقۇغان ۋە بىخەتەرلىكىدىن ئەندىشە قىلغانلار info@safeguarddefenders.com ئېلخەت ئادرېسىمىزغا ئۇچۇر قىلسا بولىدۇ.

Introduction

“The [Chinese] police asked if I knew anyone from our city living in Türkiye... They directly asked me for the names of other Uyghurs...”

This guest investigation sheds new light on the People’s Republic of China’s transnational repression of Uyghurs living in Türkiye (formerly known as Turkey) by documenting the experiences of Uyghur victims. Beijing’s motivations are best understood against the backdrop of recent developments in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, northwest China, where most of the 12 million Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking and largely Muslim ethnic group, live.

State violence against Uyghurs began to escalate in 2016 when Chen Quanguo was appointed the region’s Communist Party Secretary¹. In order to quash dissent and promote a massive Sinicization of Uyghur culture, hundreds of “re-education” camps were established where, according to multiple reports, at least one million Uyghurs were thought to have been arbitrarily detained. These facilities were set up like labour camps with watch towers, razor wire and guards equipped with tear gas, stun guns and electric batons.² A leaked Chinese government document cited Chen as saying these centres should “teach like a school, be managed like the military, and defended like a prison”.³ A 2022 UN report described conditions for Uyghurs at these camps as possibly amounting to “crimes against humanity”.⁴ It is thought that many Uyghur detainees have since been transferred to factories and placed into forced labour.⁵ Even those Uyghurs outside the camps or forced labour facilities are living under an intense surveillance system via the use of facial-recognition cameras, non-voluntary collection of biometric data, phone monitoring and a dense array of police checkpoints.⁶ 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. Around **80%** of the almost 100 Uyghurs who participated in this qualitative study said they had lost contact with their family back home in 2017 or even earlier. Concerns about their welfare makes Uyghurs overseas particularly vulnerable to Beijing’s threats (see page 7).

The transnational repression of Uyghurs living overseas is one element of a wider programme of long-arm policing by the Chinese state. An earlier Safeguard Defenders’ report documented how Beijing abuses bilateral extradition treaties and judicial cooperation agreements, such as INTERPOL’s Red Notice system, to force people, including Uyghurs, to return to China.⁷ Another report documented China’s “Persuade to Return” system that uses a variety of covert and illegal tactics, including threats against family back home, to force people to go back to China.⁸

The focus of this report is on Türkiye. Historical, cultural and linguistic similarities between Uyghurs and Turkish people have long made Türkiye a popular destination for Uyghurs to live, study, and, for some, to seek asylum. Türkiye has one of the largest Uyghur diasporas in the world, with an estimated population of 35,000–45,000 (of which around 10,000 are refugees).⁹ In recent years, however, Türkiye has been losing its reputation as a safe haven as Ankara more closely aligns itself with Beijing economically and politically.¹⁰ In 2017, the two countries signed an extradition agreement that China has signed into law but Türkiye had not yet done so by the time of this report’s publication.¹¹ Türkiye has been rejecting asylum and long-term residency applications from Uyghurs, and deporting some as “illegal immigrants”.¹²

This report focuses on the harassment of Uyghurs living in Türkiye by Chinese police and state agents (employees of China’s missions in the country). Data and insights from a survey of 93 Uyghurs living in Türkiye and longform, semi-structured interviews with 17 of them, all conducted in 2022, reveal new details about how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is carrying out transnational repression of Uyghurs in Türkiye.

This study found that:

- **The CCP has established transnational networks to spy on Uyghurs in Türkiye.** These networks are structured around a Uyghur neighbourhood or district in **China** and involve Chinese police and Neighbourhood Working Groups there and Chinese police working with Chinese missions and Uyghur informants in **Türkiye**.

Police officers are responsible for “educating” and informing each student abroad on how to behave in a foreign country. There are at least two police assigned for every student from our neighbourhood.

- **Chinese police leverage intelligence gathered via these transnational networks to control Uyghurs in Türkiye.** Applications for passports, financial difficulties and concerns about family back home were exploited by Chinese police to coerce Uyghur targets.

I think the police knew about my financial situation here in Türkiye, probably from their informants. I was in a financially difficult position a while ago. Only a few people around me knew the situation... I started to suspect almost every Uyghur around me.

- **Chinese police pressure Uyghurs in Türkiye to work for them as informants, keep silent about the human rights situation in Uyghur regions back home in China or take part in pro-China propaganda.**

A policeman called me. “Before you post anything, think about your siblings,” he said. I deleted everything, fearing that something bad would happen to them.

This transnational repression not only poses a direct threat to the fundamental freedoms of Uyghurs living overseas, who live in fear for their families back home and often lack official documentation in the country of residence, it also constitutes a severe violation of the national sovereignty of third states such as Türkiye.

**

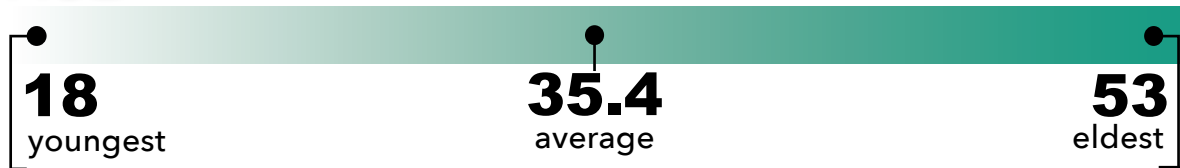
This guest investigation, *Targeted in Türkiye: China’s Transnational Repression Against Uyghurs*, is based on independent research conducted by **Yalkun Uluyol**,¹³ a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Department of Social and Administrative Science, Koç University in Istanbul, Türkiye. His primary fields of interest include comparative politics and international political economy, and his research focuses on the rise of China and its implications for the dynamics of the international order.

The survey in numbers

In March 2022, the author of this study circulated a request on social media platforms, WhatsApp groups and other networks popular with Uyghurs living in Türkiye to find volunteers willing to fill in a survey. Criteria for acceptance were: respondents must be Uyghur, originally from China and with family still living there, and having arrived in Türkiye no earlier than 2010. In total, 93 qualified responses were recorded. From these, 17 were selected for longform, semi-structured interviews.

Out of 93 survey respondents:

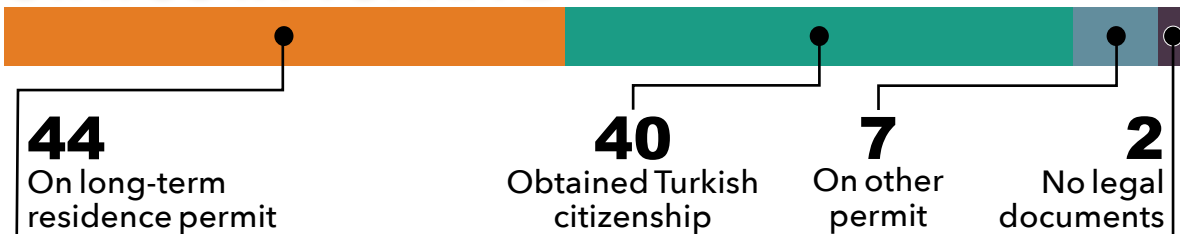
AGE



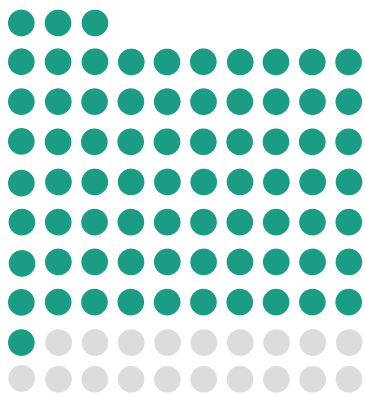
GENDER



STATUS IN TÜRKIYE

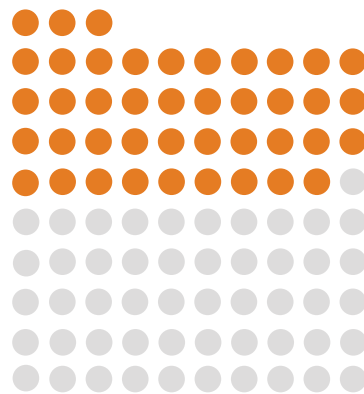


FAMILY CONTACT



74
Unable to contact family in China since at least 2017

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION



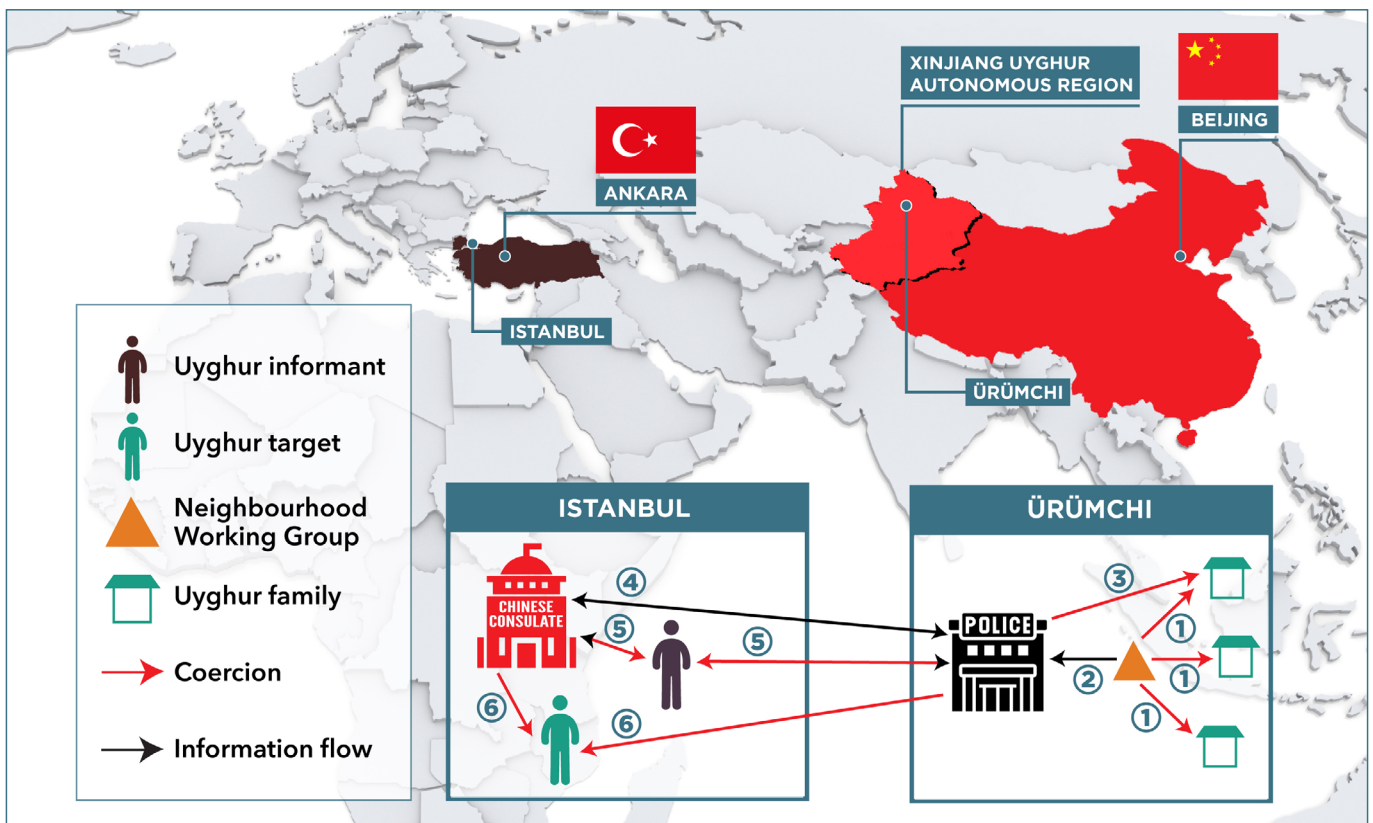
42
Reported being harassed by Chinese police or state agents

CCP networks of transnational repression

How does the CCP identify and monitor Uyghurs living in Türkiye?

Findings from interviews indicate that the Chinese state keeps detailed records on Uyghurs living in Türkiye from information gathered via established networks in both countries. In China, these networks appear to be based around the hometown of the Uyghur target and are led by the local police with help from the Neighbourhood Working Group. Chinese police then collect further information on the Uyghur target with the help of Chinese missions and Uyghur informants in Türkiye. Police contact the Uyghur target either directly by phone call or message; sometimes family back in China is forced to act as a go between; other times Chinese mission staff in Türkiye get in touch.

SURVEILLANCE IN SIX STEPS



- ① Neighbourhood Working Groups collect information from families with relatives living overseas.
- ② They report this to local police who set up files on each Uyghur target.
- ③ Police may also directly get information from families.
- ④ Police seek additional information from the Chinese Embassy in Ankara and the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul.
- ⑤ Police and/or Chinese mission may contact Uyghur informants in Türkiye for more information.
- ⑥ Police and/or Chinese mission use this to contact, coerce and threaten the Uyghur target in Türkiye.

CCP's transnational networks for monitoring Uyghurs living in Türkiye. Here Istanbul and Ürümchi are used as examples only, transnational networks were found between multiple locations in both Uyghur areas in China and in Türkiye.

CHINA: Police and Neighbourhood Working Groups

Neighbourhood Working Groups are largely responsible for collecting information from Uyghur families with relatives living in Türkiye. They may ask the family to fill in forms and provide images. The kinds of information sought include the status of the individual in Türkiye, their address and phone number, and scans of any official documentation such as visa applications and student cards. Working groups report this to the police who set up a file on each Uyghur target. Police may also directly contact families asking for information and updates.

The police have harassed my family since I came to Türkiye... [They] constantly asked for materials from my mother, including my student certificate, residence permit, student ID and the phone number I use in Türkiye, etc. I would send them to my mom, then she would pass them to the person in charge.



Neighbourhood Working Groups (*Shequ Gongzuo Zu* 社区工作组) are grassroots bodies that are temporary and task-specific. They implement decisions by local grassroots CCP organizations on issues such as ensuring public security, managing sanitation, promoting public health, coordinating community activities and events, and resolving disputes among residents. The working groups appear to be cooperating with local police to collect information from Uyghur families that have relatives living overseas.

It appears that local police have been made responsible for *Uyghurs originally from their neighbourhood or district* living thousands of miles away in Türkiye. Interviewees that were contacted directly by Chinese police reported that the officers were always stationed in their hometown. One interviewee said a Chinese police officer contacted them to ask for information about other Uyghurs in Türkiye, emphasizing, “We’re only interested in those from our town, not any others.”

The police asked if I knew anyone from our city living in Türkiye. The police know that I live in a Uyghur district in Istanbul, so sometimes, they directly asked for the names of those Uyghurs. Once, they asked for details of a funeral for someone from my town who passed away in Türkiye, only one day after the funeral. I personally did not know that person, but I was shocked by how quickly the police officer knew about that funeral. “Tell us everything,” he said.

TÜRKIYE: Chinese missions and Uyghur informants

Local police in China also work with the Chinese Embassy in Ankara or Chinese Consulate in Istanbul to seek additional information on the Uyghurs they have on file. For example, attempts to renew passports triggered the start of transnational repression for several people in this study.

I applied to renew my passport in Istanbul. About a month after my application, a policeman from my hometown contacted me. "Are you there?" he asked. "I see you've applied for a new passport. As you know, it's a very complicated process and it's only possible if I approve it."

Local police and mission staff also use Uyghur informants in Türkiye that they have tracked down using these networks to spy on other Uyghurs and Uyghur organizations in the country. They appear to be interested in the financial situation of Uyghurs in Türkiye. Many young Uyghurs living overseas lost financial support from their family back in China when relatives started to be rounded up and sent to re-education camps and/or they lost touch with them.

I think the police knew my financial situation here in Türkiye, probably from their informants. I was in a financially difficult position a while ago. Only a few people around me knew. The police reached out to me and said, "If you collaborate with us, all your problems can be solved. We can help you financially"... I started to suspect almost every Uyghur around me.

Once the Chinese police have gathered enough intelligence and are ready to initiate contact with the Uyghur target living in Türkiye, they tend to choose one of three different modes of communication – via family, direct contact, or through staff at the Chinese mission.

Through family



12 out of 17 interviewees were contacted through their families

The most common mode of initial contact was via family members on a WeChat call. Since so many Uyghurs living overseas have not been able to talk to their family (see page 17) for several years (75 of the 93 survey respondents said they have had no contact since at least 2017), this first communication is understandably very emotional. Families back in China have little option but to pass on messages from the police, living in an atmosphere of fear with the threat of detention, a spell in a re-education camp or forced labour hanging over their heads. During these phone calls, many interviewees said they believed that police officers were present and listening in.

The second time I was contacted was through my father, who called from the police station. He said, "Do not post anything against the government." I asked about my mother. He did not answer and hung up.

Direct contact



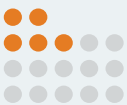
15 out of 17 interviewees were contacted directly by the police

Sometimes, police made direct contact via a phone call or messaging app friend request. WeChat, WhatsApp, QQ, Facebook, Instagram, iMessage, Messenger and email were all recorded as being used. The phone number calling or registered to the app sometimes belonged to the police or state agent. Sometimes, the police used the phone of the Uyghur target's family member.

Foreign phone numbers

Several interviewees said that when Chinese police called them on WhatsApp, they were using accounts registered under foreign numbers, for example from countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, Türkiye and the US. WhatsApp is blocked in China, so police first need to register a phone overseas in order to use the app in China with a VPN.

Through Chinese mission staff



5 out of 17 interviewees were contacted by staff from the Embassy or Consulate

The Chinese Embassy in Ankara and the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul play a role in helping Chinese police contact Uyghurs overseas, as well as in monitoring them. This usually involves contacting the individual to meet up, sometimes with the offer of arranging a call with their parents. In a 2022 Chinese government report,¹⁴ Beijing said that Chinese foreign missions held more than 28 video conferences during COVID in which "overseas Chinese from Xinjiang met their family members online and shared with each other their work and life." This begs the question, in an age when most people own their own phones, why would families need the Chinese authorities' help to contact each other?

Someone working in the Chinese Embassy approached me... She asked me to come to a café if I wanted to speak to my mother. Despite being sceptical, I went there with my friend only because I wanted to talk to my mother, whom I had not spoken to for more than five years. She [the Embassy worker] called a number from her WeChat account, and my mother answered. My mother said, "Don't circulate lies about our country, don't participate in illegal activities."

Other times, police arranged for mission staff to take over contact with Uyghur targets.

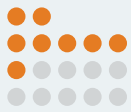
Police got in touch with me a few days after I arrived in Türkiye. They asked me to go to the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul and collaborate with them.

The goals of CCP's transnational repression

What does the CCP want from Uyghurs living in Türkiye?

Testimonies collected from this study indicate that China uses transnational repression networks to control Uyghurs living in Türkiye. Demands include taking part in pro-CCP propaganda activities, deleting posts critical of the CCP, quitting activism and, increasingly, spying on other Uyghurs in Türkiye.

Producing pro-CCP propaganda



8 out of 17 interviewees said they had been pressured to take part in propaganda activities

In response to widespread international condemnation of the mass re-education camps and forced labour programmes in Uyghur areas in China, Beijing has launched its own counter-propaganda campaign, including publishing official rejections of accusations and coercing Uyghurs in China into recording and spreading "scripted" video denials.^{15 16}

Interviewees in this study explained how police had tried to coerce them into delivering pro-CCP propaganda. This ranged from taking part in nationalistic activities organized by the Embassy or Consulate to writing articles praising the CCP for foreign media.

Police called me several times after I came to Türkiye. Once they asked me to go to the Consulate and collaborate with them and write Chinese propaganda opinion articles in Turkish newspapers...

Keeping silent



12 out of 17 interviewees said they had been pressured to stay silent

Uyghurs who are openly critical of the CCP in online posts or in interviews with media may be targeted through transnational repression to stay silent. This includes ceasing all activism work and deleting existing posts. Most of the interviewees in this study who were threatened this way were told by police that if they did not comply, their family would suffer.

They got my family members talk to me to convince me to stop my activism. "We sent you there to study, but you have destroyed our family," my father told me in a sudden call from a Chinese number in June 2020. I knew that these words were not coming from his heart.

“The lives of your father, mother, brother and uncle are in your hands. Do what we say.” I refused to work for them. Later, I learned that the Chinese government had put 33 of my relatives in camps, including my close family.

Spying on other Uyghurs



12 out of 17 interviewees said they had been pressured to be an informant

Every Uyghur in the diaspora is a potential informant who can provide important information. Anecdotally it appears that Chinese police are increasingly pushing Uyghurs in Türkiye to collect information on other Uyghurs and Uyghur organizations in the country. Typically, the police ask the target to “collaborate”, raising specific questions about other Uyghurs in Türkiye or Uyghur organizations. Sometimes they are asked to take photographs in areas popular with Uyghurs such as Uyghur restaurants.

The police asked for personal information, including photos of Uyghurs I know.

This has created an atmosphere of fear and growing distrust among Uyghurs in the community. Whereas in the past, keeping quiet about China’s human rights record and taking part in propaganda activities were usually enough, interviewees said that police are increasingly asking them to act as informants.

CCP transnational repression methods

How does the CCP control Uyghurs overseas?

From interview testimonies it appears that Chinese police leverage their intelligence on Uyghur targets, employing offers of help or issuing threats to them or their family members to coerce them into cooperating. Sometimes, more than one method would be used.

Threats to them and family members



All 17 interviewees said police or state agents threatened to harm their family

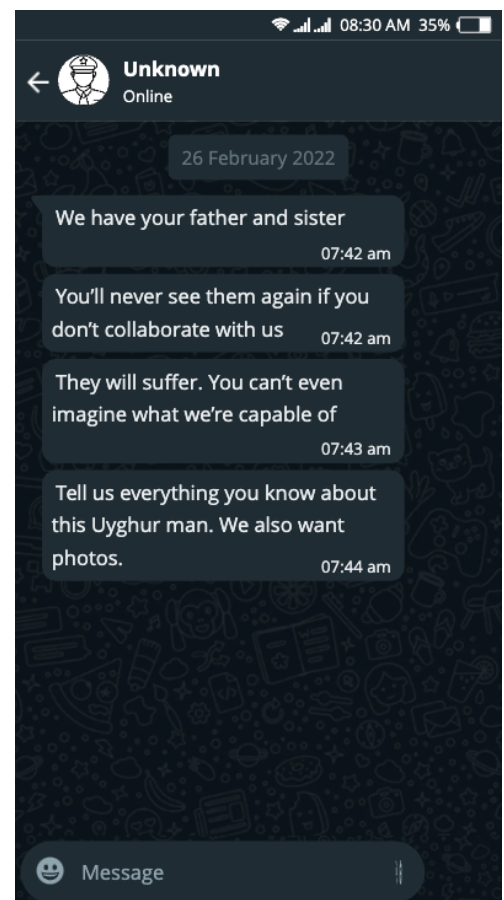
The most powerful leverage the CCP has are Uyghurs' concern for their family back home in China. The extreme human rights violations taking place in the Uyghur region, coupled with an inability to contact family back home, puts Uyghur targets in a very vulnerable position.

It has been a dilemma - to choose between my cause and my family. The police asked me to work for them to save my family but at the expense of other families being destroyed by the information I provide.

Threats are parsed in a variety of ways from "Don't you care about your family?" to "You will never see your family again."

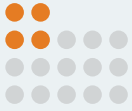
I would be announced as a "terrorist" if I didn't provide inside information about the [Uyghur] organization. They threatened to imprison my father and mother for "funding" me - the terrorist.

It was a horrible experience. "We know you are not coming back," the police officer told me. "But we have your father and sister. You'll never see them again if you don't collaborate with us. They will suffer. You can't even imagine what we're capable of."



Several respondents said they had been threatened themselves with one being told that, "We can reach you wherever you are." Another respondent, who had published a book about the re-education camps, said Chinese police called him to threaten to "cut off his hand" unless he stopped writing.

Problems with passports



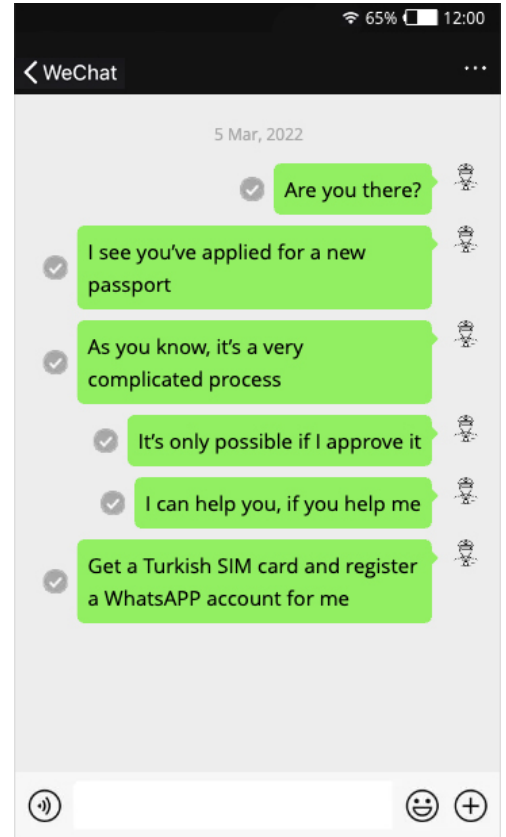
4 out of 17 interviewees said police had used their application for passport renewal to pressure them

Several interviewees said that applications to renew passports had triggered the first contact from police. They were told that if they cooperated, they would be able to get a new passport. Otherwise they faced being left without any valid travel documents.

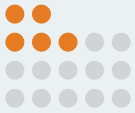
Without a passport, it is not possible to apply for a work permit, access healthcare or travel to another country. China's weaponization of passports against Uyghurs living overseas was documented in a 2020 Uyghur Human Rights Project report that described how Embassy officials even destroyed valid passports, leaving many Uyghurs overseas stateless.¹⁷

All of those in this study who said their passport applications were leveraged in this way and who refused to cooperate failed to get a new passport.

I became politically active to become a voice for my family and millions of Uyghurs. [When] I applied to renew my passport in 2021, the Chinese Consulate contacted me. The person in charge said, "We have been helping minority students with their passport renewals, but you will not get a renewal because you have been in contact with the wrong people."



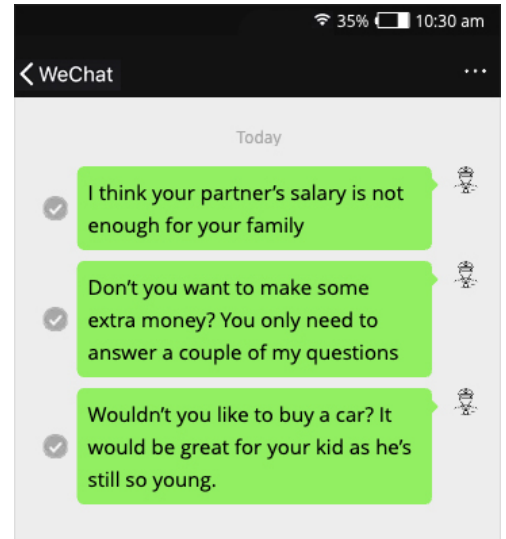
Financial incentives



5 out of 17 interviewees were offered financial incentives in the form of scholarships, subsidies or rewards for their cooperation

Chinese police may also offer money in exchange for cooperation. Interviewees that were in financial difficulties were contacted by police officers, who were aware of their situation and who offered help if they agreed to act as informants. Such personal information was likely gathered from other Uyghur informants.

“If you collaborate with and listen to us, all your problems can be solved. We will help you financially.”



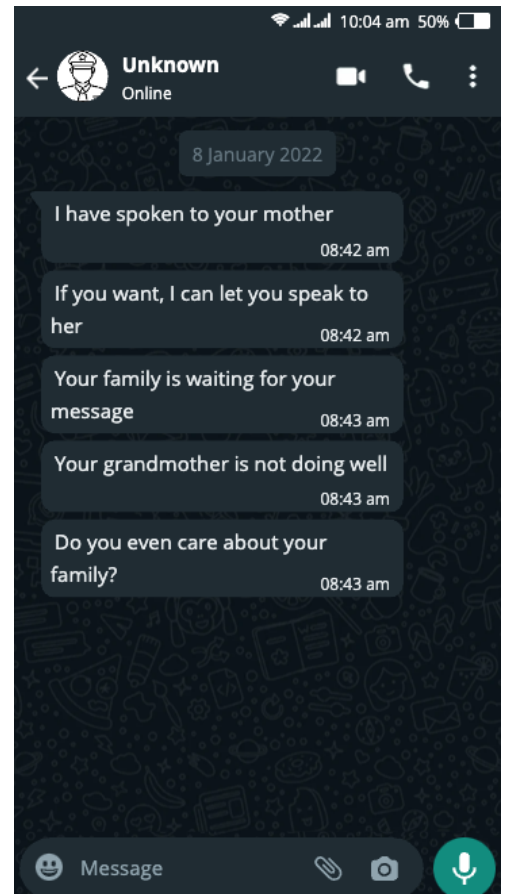
Contact with family



6 out of 17 interviewees were offered to be put in contact with their family if they cooperated.

Since many Uyghurs livings overseas have been cut off from their family from around 2016 (80% or 75 out of the 93 people surveyed in this study), Chinese police or state agents may offer to arrange an online or phone reunion in exchange for their cooperation.

The Chinese Consulate contacted me another time, inviting me to participate in a “video conference” with my family members under the condition that I would stop speaking out.



A note from the author, Yalkun Uluyol

In 2016, my friends and relatives began deleting me from their WeChat accounts. My grandmother and grandfather started ignoring my calls. My adult cousins with university diplomas went back to “school”.¹⁸ I stopped hearing from my uncle, who used to go for “tea” at the local police station.¹⁹ My five female cousins were detained in one night, leaving their kids behind. My grandmother passed away in early 2018, without being able to see her beloved daughter — my mother. We grieved in our two-bedroomed apartment in Istanbul, far away from home and our loved ones. No one back home dared to speak to us on the phone when we wanted to express our condolences and share our pain. Maybe all these experiences prepared me for the day I heard from my father for the last time in June 2018. He, too, disappeared without a trace and a proper goodbye. I accepted the reality quicker than I expected. I started searching for him and tried to find ways to save him. It took me two years to confirm his detention in the Qumul Detention Center and another two years to verify that he is currently serving a 16-year prison sentence near Ürümchi. I still don’t know why. I am not sure if he is in good health or if he knows he has a granddaughter now. My uncle that used to go for “tea” at the local police station got a life sentence. My source told me to be grateful that my father is still alive, at least... Recently, my grandfather passed away. Nothing much has changed in five years — we grieved in our two-bedroomed apartment in Istanbul, far away from home and our loved ones still.



Credit: Yalkun Uluyol

I genuinely wish my story to be unique. Unfortunately, it is not. This is the reality of Uyghurs living in and outside the Uyghur region since 2016.

Recently, my grandfather passed away. Nothing much has changed in five years - we grieved in our two-bedroomed apartment in Istanbul, far away from home and our loved ones still.

The repressive policies of the Chinese state now extend beyond its borders. Chinese state-sponsored repression worldwide has affected the lives of thousands of Uyghurs through surveillance, threats, and other forms of daily harassment, causing most of the Uyghur diaspora to live in constant fear.

The fear might not always be related to their own security; Uyghurs usually worry much more about their loved ones living in the Uyghur region. It is not a secret for Uyghurs — we are strictly monitored by the Chinese state. We know that what we say or do directly or indirectly affects the people we are related to. I did not ask many questions when my father asked for documents, including my residence permit, student certificate, and address registration, among others, during my student years, thinking all that was part of the procedures to keep my family and me “safe”. But now I know it is part of the Chinese government’s mechanisms to monitor Uyghurs living abroad. From the experiences of people I know, I am aware that this is not just limited to the information itself. State agencies use the information collected against people in the diaspora and the Uyghur region as part of their repressive policies.

This report sheds light on the experiences of Uyghurs living under the constant surveillance and harassment of the Chinese government, contributing to the understanding of China’s transnational repression against Uyghurs, specifically those living in Türkiye. I would like to thank Nureddin Izbasar and Ali Latifoğlu for their help and assistance during data collection, Ondřej Klimeš for his comments on the report’s earlier draft, and Safeguard Defenders’ team for their hard work in the publishing process.

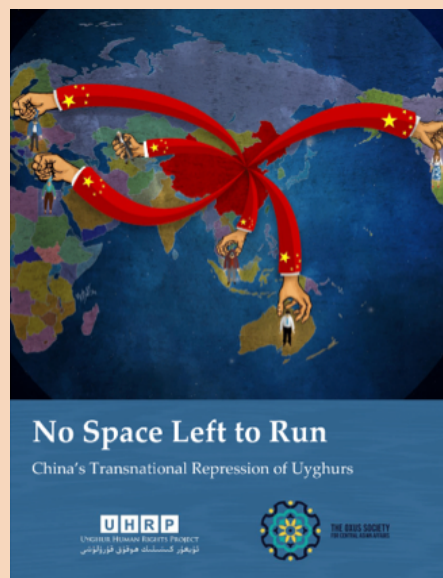
As a Uyghur scholar in social sciences, it is my responsibility to uncover and investigate rights violations against Uyghurs, within or beyond borders, with my tools and skills. Governments and international agencies are responsible for protecting Uyghurs from repression with the tools and mechanisms they have. I hope this report will aid in this purpose.

Contemporary research on China's transnational repression of Uyghurs overseas

This report complements and builds on the findings of several studies published by academics and non-governmental organizations on China's transnational repression of Uyghur diaspora communities. These include (but are not limited to) the below reports and datasets:

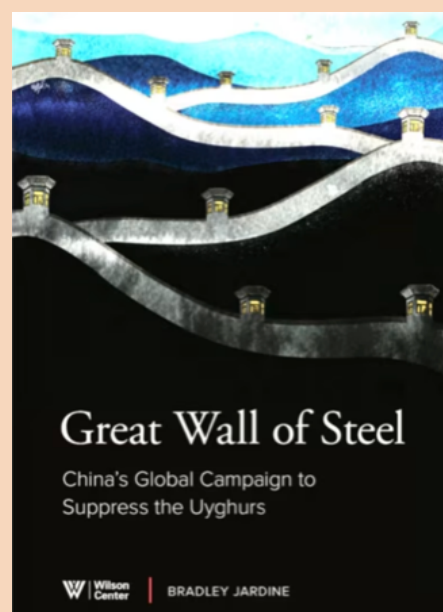
One of the most comprehensive accounts of China's transnational repression of Uyghurs is the China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs' Dataset created by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs (available [here](#)).

No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs (2021) analyzes this dataset (available [here](#)), finding **5,532** cases of Uyghurs facing intimidation, **1,150** cases of Uyghurs being detained by the host country, and **424** cases of Uyghurs deported, extradited, or rendered back to China, **between 1997 and March 2021**. The dataset is built from reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, World Uyghur Congress and the UHRP, as well as other sources, such as media reports. It found that Thailand, Türkiye, Egypt and Malaysia had the highest number of cases of repression against Uyghurs with hundreds of cases each. Türkiye, the focus of this report, has **473 cases of repression against Uyghurs** (one of the highest along with Thailand).



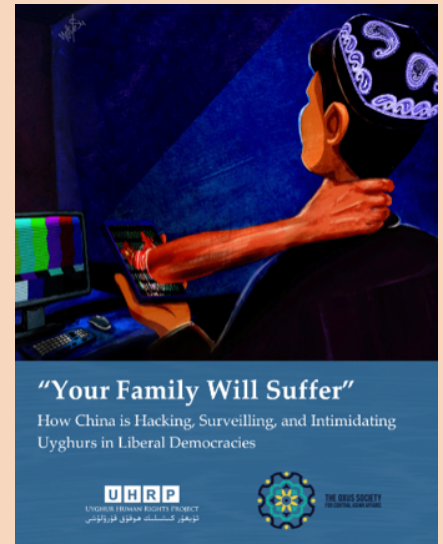
Wilson Center's *Great Wall of Steel: China's Global Campaign to Suppress the Uyghurs* (2022) by Bradley Jardine examines the tools used by the Chinese government to harass and detain Uyghurs living in different countries (available [here](#)).

It charts how the CCP uses modern communication tools as part of its transnational repression against Uyghurs, including cyberattacks and digital surveillance. It also describes how online harassment, and threats to family are often used as a precursor to more serious forms of repression, such as involuntary returns.²⁰



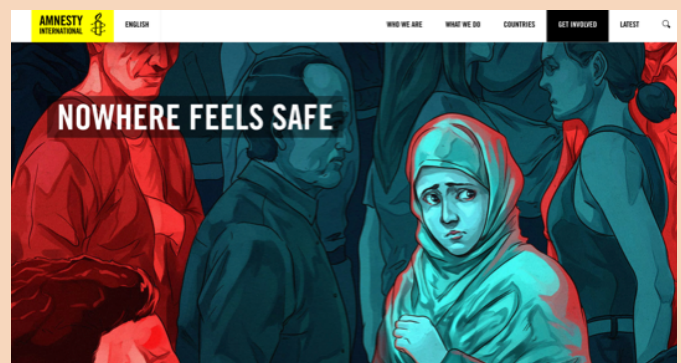
"Your Family Will Suffer" How China is Hacking, Surveilling, and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies (2021) is another joint project between the UHRP and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs (available [here](#)).

It highlights the experiences of Uyghurs living in liberal democracies across North America, Asia Pacific and Europe. Survey data in the report showed that **95.8%** of the 72 participants felt threatened and 73.5% of them had experienced digital risks, threats or other kinds of online harassment. The report exclusively focused on Uyghur digital security and China's digital violence and intimidation against Uyghurs.



In 2020, Amnesty International published the results of a similar study called *Nowhere Feels Safe* (available [here](#)).

Amnesty collated information from approximately 400 Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and members of other ethnic groups living in 22 countries across five continents between September 2018 and September 2019 using face-to-face interviews and an online questionnaire. About **two thirds** of respondents said they were too frightened to have their names associated with the study in case they or their family were punished by the authorities in China.



The report also cited several Uyghur interviewees living overseas who said Chinese authorities had threatened that their family members would be detained if they did not return to China or that they would never see their family again if they did not inform on other Uyghurs.

Latest research

New research on the transnational repression of Uyghurs is being released all the time. A recent report of note is *We know you better than yourself: China's transnational repression of the Uyghur diaspora* (2023) by David Tobin and Nyrola Elimä and published by the University of Sheffield in the UK (available [here](#)). Echoing *Targeted in Türkiye's findings*, Tobin and Elimä found that since 2017, the CCP's focus has been on greater efforts to use Uyghur informants, intimidating Uyghurs from speaking openly and recruiting them to "create positive images of China." Another is UHRP's *"I Escaped, But Not to Freedom": Failure to Protect Uyghur Refugees* released in June 2023 (available [here](#)), which accuses the UN refugee agency of falling short in protecting Uyghurs overseas from CCP harassment, including forced deportation and threats such as those outlined in this report, *Targeted in Türkiye*.

UHRP also keeps a regularly updated list on new publications [here](#).

Conclusions

The findings from this small study indicate that the People's Republic of China has established transnational networks to monitor, threaten and control Uyghurs living in Türkiye. The Uyghur diaspora is especially vulnerable to Chinese state coercion because they are mostly cut off from their families back home. Loved ones in China are under heavy surveillance and fearful of answering calls or messages from family members overseas in case they are punished. Hundreds of thousands of others are unreachable because they have been detained, placed into re-education camps or forced into labour facilities since 2017.

Survey results and interviewee testimonies showed that:

- 75 out of 93 respondents have had no contact with their family since at least 2017.
- Chinese police are working with Neighbourhood Working Groups in Uyghur areas in China and Chinese mission staff and Uyghur informants in Türkiye to track and monitor the Uyghur diaspora.
- Every one of the 17 interviewees in this study said Chinese police or state agents had threatened to harm their family.
- Transnational repression was focused on coercing Uyghurs in Türkiye to make pro-China propaganda, keep silent about human rights abuses back home and, increasingly, work as informants for Beijing.

These results complement and add to the findings of several contemporary studies on China's transnational repression of Uyghurs overseas, such as the Uyghur Human Rights Project's *Your Family Will Suffer: How China is Hacking, Surveillance, and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies* (2021) and *Beyond Silence: Collaboration Between Arab States and China in the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs* (2022) and *'We know you better than you know yourself': China's transnational repression of the Uyghur diaspora* (2023) published by the University of Sheffield. While this report has focused on Türkiye only, the results from these and other research indicate it is reasonable to assume that such networks monitoring the Uyghur diaspora are operating in many other countries around the world.

China's transnational repression of Uyghurs overseas has created a pervasive climate of fear. Threats to harm or detain loved ones back home amount to psychological torture. Those targeted are not just human rights activists and advocates but also ordinary Uyghurs, including students and members of the business community.

Transnational repression violates international human rights laws and principles on the right to be free from torture and the right to liberty and security of an individual as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. They also impinge on an individual's right to freedom of movement, right to free expression, freedom from arbitrary detention and freedom from fear. China's transnational repression also actively undermines the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.

It is our hope that this guest investigation adds to the mounting body of evidence of China's transnational repression of the Uyghur diaspora and as such can encourage national governments to effectively counter this while also protecting the rights and safety of Uyghurs in their jurisdictions.

References

- ¹ Chen was replaced by Ma Xingrui at the end of 2021.
- ² Yu, X. (2022, 31 August). A Uyghur's Story: What It's Like Inside a Xinjiang Reeducation Facility. VOA News. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-uyghur-s-story-what-it-s-like-inside-a-xinjiang-reeducation-facility-/6724807.html>
- ³ Dooley, B. (2018, 25 October). Inside China's Internment Camps: Tear Gas, Tasers and Textbooks. AFP News. Available at: <https://www.afp.com/en/inside-chinas-internment-camps-tear-gas-tasers-and-textbooks>
- ⁴ UN News. (2022, 31 August). China responsible for 'serious human rights violations' in Xinjiang province: UN human rights report. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/08/1125932>
- ⁵ US Department of Labor. (2021). *Against Their Will: The Situation in Xinjiang*. Available at: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/against-their-will-the-situation-in-xinjiang>
- ⁶ Maizland, L. (2022, 22 September). China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>
- ⁷ Safeguard Defenders. (2021). *No Room to Run: China's expanded (mis)use of INTERPOL since the rise of Xi Jinping*. Available at: <https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/No%20Room%20to%20Run.pdf>
- ⁸ Safeguard Defenders. (2022). *Patrol and Persuade: A follow-up investigation to 110 Overseas*. Available at: <https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/Patrol%20and%20Persuade%20v2.pdf>
- ⁹ Beydulla, M. (2019). Experiences of Uyghur Migration to Turkey and the United States: Issues of Religion, Law, Society, Residence, and Citizenship. In *Migration and Islamic Ethics* (pp. 174-195). Brill
- ¹⁰ MacGillivray, I. (2022, 18 August). Burgeoning ties between Beijing and Ankara create an existential problem for the West. *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*. Available at: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/burgeoning-ties-between-beijing-and-ankara-create-an-existential-problem-for-the-west/>
- ¹¹ Kashgarian, A. and Sahinkaya, E. (2021, 7 January). Analysts: Extradition Treaty Between Turkey, China Endangers Uighur Refugees. VOA. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-analysts-extradition-treaty-between-turkey-china-endangers-uighur-refugees/6200467.html>
- ¹² Altay, K. (2021, 2 Mar). Why Erdogan has abandoned the Uyghurs. *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/why-erdogan-has-abandoned-the-uyghurs/>
- ¹³ Uluyol is also the co-author of the article "Emerging partnership in a post-Western world? The political economy of China-Turkey relations," published in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* and co-author of the report "Driving Force: Automotive Supply Chains and Forced Labor in the Uyghur Region," published by Sheffield Hallam University, Kennedy Center for International Justice.
- ¹⁴ In 2022, China's permanent mission to the UN submitted a 131-page document in response to the accusation of "crimes against humanity". The relevant text is on page 113 of that report. Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organisations in Switzerland, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/ANNEX_A.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid. In the report, they claimed that Uyghurs are “living a happy life in peace and contentment, it is the greatest human rights protection and the best human rights practice”.

¹⁶ Kao, J., Zhong, R., Mozur, P., & Krolik, A. (2021, 23 June). How China Spreads Its Propaganda Version of Life for Uyghurs. *Propublica*. Available at: <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-china-uses-youtube-and-twitter-to-spread-its-propaganda-version-of-life-for-uyghurs-in-xinjiang>

¹⁷ World Uyghur Congress. (2020). *Weaponized Passports: The Crisis of Uyghur Statelessness*. Available at: <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/weaponized-passports-the-crisis-of-uyghur-statelessness/>

¹⁸ A euphemism for being sent to a re-education camp.

¹⁹ A euphemism for being interrogated by the police.

²⁰ For more on China’s involuntary returns - the use of threats, harassment and even kidnappings to force individuals to return to China - see Safeguard Defenders’ report “Involuntary Returns: China’s covert operation to force ‘fugitives’ overseas back home”. Available at: <https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/INvoluntary%20Returns.pdf>