

Up to a million Muslims imprisoned by China

By [Callum Tennant](#), Deputy Politics Editor

Thursday 8 November 2018



User: SKopp

ROBERT BROWNING once wrote: "Ignorance is not innocence but sin." Unbeknown to most people, a United Nations Human Rights Committee has been told that there are reports of up to one million Uighur Muslims being held in internment camps in the autonomous region of Xinjiang, in Eastern China. Rising tensions between religious groups and Beijing have been reported for years but this would mark the most significant escalation in those tensions and would cement the theory that Beijing has decided to take a more hostile stance to religion within China – especially Islam. But who are the Uighur Muslims?

The Uighur people mostly practice Islam and speak a Turkic language; they eat different food to the rest of China and have significant cultural differences. A feeling of difference is heightened as the region rotates in and out of Chinese control. The Republic of East-Turkestan was declared as an independent state by the Uighurs in 1993. Just a year later the area was back under Chinese control. In 1994 this happened again, but five years later the region was reabsorbed by China, which was now under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. The eastern border of the Xinjiang region is more than 1000km closer to Riyadh than it is to Beijing. In a region that is so different to the rest of China, in a country as vast as China, it is easy to see why some may not feel Chinese. It is this risk of separation which has made relations between Beijing and Xinjiang's Uighur's population so frosty. If you search into Google: 'Xinjiang value to Beijing' it comes up with a Trip Advisor review of the Xinjiang Hotel in Beijing, the review sums up the issue Beijing faces with the Xinjiang region – "Good value but awkward location." Xinjiang is one of the most resource rich regions of China. It is home to a fifth of Chinese oil deposits, it has the largest natural gas reserves and an estimated 40 per cent of the country's entire coal reserves. Because of this, the Chinese government has invested millions in the area to further industrialise and increase the rate at which these valuable resources can be extracted. Beijing can ill afford to let a separatist movement grow here and has responded with an iron fist, which the world has largely ignored until now. The Uighur people and the religion of Islam in China appear to be under attack, with people of the religion or ethnicity subject to a campaign of persecution. Despite being home to just 1.5 per cent of the Chinese population the area is where almost 20 per cent of Chinese arrests take place – that's not including the Muslim populations said to be housed in "transformation through education" centres.

For months, Chinese officials angrily denied that these camps even existed. However, following the UN hearing the script and tone has changed. Completely changed. China is now fiercely defending its policy, saying that the people at these camps have been “infected with religious extremism” and that re-education is the only cure. But criticism and concerns are growing. There are reports of an excessive police state in the region, checkpoints on dozens of streets, the installation of cameras and even stories of Muslim minorities having their passports recalled with travel restrictions. Recent satellite images show that both new and existing camps have been rapidly expanded, some are suspected of being designed to hold thousands of Muslims with no charges against them – the largest being bigger than even the largest US prisons – some of the largest in the world. These camps are often surrounded with tall fences lined with barbed wire, interrupted by watch towers. Inside the classrooms, pictures show multiple cameras which watch the “students” as they work. Personal testimonials say that activities include learning patriotic Chinese songs and writing self-criticising essays, making this look like a state sponsored indoctrination scheme. Reports of mental and physical violence – including torture – are widespread. In interviews by the Washington Post, men previously held at the camp describe how continued disobedience could lead to waterboarding, how the food was poor, and the Muslim population of the camp were sometimes forced to eat pork – forbidden in Islam – and continued offenders were forced to drink alcohol – also forbidden. What was first described as a war on terror now appears to be a war on the very identity of not only the Uighur but also of any Chinese Muslims in the area. A term being used to describe the situation by some is cultural genocide. AFP journalists who examined public documents from the agency in charge of the “re-education centres” found they have been making some alarming purchases, such as 550 electric cattle prods. This at the least raises questions about the legitimacy of Beijing’s claims that it is merely trying to help people troubled by religious extremism. At worst, China is guilty of crimes against humanity.



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