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# **Family or Freedom: The changing landscape of Uyghur diaspora activism<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter presents an overview of Uyghur diaspora activism in Europe, Türkiye and North America since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The different phases of Uyghur activism were influenced by international politics, like the non-aligned movement and anti-communism during the Cold War and lately by rising US-China tensions. Even more importantly they were coloured by what was happening in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Student protests in the late 1980s, independent movements and harsh state clampdown in the 1990s, the rise in religiosity and economic inequality rising throughout the 2000s, the Ürümchi Violence in 2009 and violent campaigns against religious extremism in the 2010s provided the Uyghur activist organisations established throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with members and motivation. Debates over whether to focus on independence, strengthened autonomy or human rights continued throughout. The mass-incarcerations and state violence against the minoritised people of XUAR in 2017 became a game changer for diaspora activism. Despite an increasing Uyghur diaspora population, activism had remained rather limited until 2017, but the internment of 100,000s of ordinary Uyghurs propelled their relatives abroad into activism. These were often Uyghurs of a different demographic than the previously dominant activists. They were younger, well-educated and well-integrated into their host societies. The campaigns became digital, more personal and focussed on their families rather than general principles. After the release of many Uyghurs in 2020, some activists retreated from the scene, but this phase has left Uyghur activism and its institutions permanently changed.

## **Introduction**

When working for Radio Free Europe in 1971, Erkin Alptekin lamented how the international community only cared about Uyghurs in China when conflict broke out (Lawrence, 2004). Alptekin, who went on to co-found the World Uyghur Conference (WUC) in 2004, has been one of the most prominent Uyghur diaspora activists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The continued relevance of his observation was reflected in the sporadic attention Uyghurs received in the international media over the ensuing decades, usually in response to isolated incidents of violence perpetrated by or against Uyghurs. Since 2017, however, there has been an unprecedented boom in media coverage.

Mounting evidence of the incarceration of possibly over one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other minoritized people, grid surveillance, rapid securitisation and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) extreme assimilationist policies, has brought international attention to one of the greatest human rights atrocities of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In August 2022, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report alleging grave human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other minoritized peoples in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR),<sup>2</sup> possibly amounting to crimes against humanity (OHCHR 2022). The report described arbitrary detentions, cultural destruction and targeting of ethnicized populations as well as a vast system of detention centers and other camps also previously described by Amnesty International (2021b), Human Rights Watch (2021) and other organisations and researchers. A large number of governments have condemned China's abuses in XUAR (Government of the Netherlands 2022). The US government, as well as several allied parliaments and political think-tanks, have even deemed the Chinese abuses to be a form of genocide against its Uyghur population (US Department of State, 2021; BBC, 2021; WUC, 2021; Newlines Institute, 2021; Uyghur Tribunal, 2021; Reuters, 2022).<sup>3</sup>

Media outlets and human rights organisations are relaying the lived experiences and heart wrenching stories of family disconnection and oppression told by Uyghurs abroad. Uyghur activists have gained unprecedented attention and profile, including being integrated into the US administration and military system. This is only the most recent development of the long history and ongoing trajectory of Uyghur diaspora activism. This chapter provides an overview of the development and transformation of Uyghur diaspora activism, including demographics, foci, key debates, and activities. It starts by outlining early Uyghur diaspora activism in Türkiye, before examining its development in Germany and North America, which became important centers of activism from the 1990s. It then homes in on the demographics of the activist movement, discussing why, despite a growing diaspora, many Uyghurs chose not to become politically active up until 2017. In the second part of the chapter, we discuss the radical shift that occurred after 2017, when the CCP's 'People's War on Terror' peaked, enforcing unprecedented surveillance and security measures in the Uyghur homeland along with stringent forms of cultural oppression.<sup>4</sup> We show how many Uyghurs who had previously maintained a careful distance now became involved in activism, the various ways in which they engaged, and how this shaped the diaspora activist movement. Lastly, we discuss how the strong solidarity experienced between 2018 and 2020 has begun to wane and certain groups and individuals are again turning away from activism. We conclude by reflecting on the future direction of Uyghur activism, arguing that the period of intense action starting in 2017, although already starting to weaken, is likely to bear lasting influence in the future. This is not least because of the degree of recognition that the Uyghurs have gained and their increased geo-political importance, which has resulted in both media attention and funding. It has changed Uyghur activism forever.

In this chapter we focus primarily on Uyghur activism in the diaspora in Türkiye, Europe and North America. We center efforts that have been gaining international attention in more liberal democratic nation-states and in international fora such as the UN. However, it should be noted that

the largest Uyghur population outside the People's Republic of China (PRC) resides in Kazakhstan, in its borderlands with China. As Sean Roberts (1998, p. 511) notes, there has been a long history of fluid cross-border migration between what are today the XUAR and the Central Asian republics across its Western border (see also Chatterjee, 2018). We acknowledge that there is an important history to be told about Uyghur activism and other non-state political work in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which stretches back to the late nineteenth century (see Brophy, 2016; Klimeš, 2015). While we do mention the importance of activism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in recent Uyghur activist mobilisation in the West, it has been beyond the scope of our research to do justice to the history of Uyghur activism in Central Asia, which is situated in a very different historical, political, linguistic and cultural context and requires a separate study.

### **Early Uyghur Diaspora Activism**

As the son of Uyghur politician and diaspora leader Isa Yusuf Alptekin (1901–1995), Erkin Alptekin (b. 1939) had been exposed to Uyghur activism and the idea of Uyghur autonomy and sovereignty from an early age. When he was ten years old, his family left the region after the CCP consolidated power in 1949, first fleeing to Kashmir and then moving to Türkiye. At that time, many Uyghurs—especially members of the land-owning elite—fled to the Soviet Union (Clark and Kamalov, 2004), Türkiye, and India to escape persecution and Maoist policies aimed at overturning the existing social order and class structure. Targeted as “feudal oppressors,” their land and wealth had been confiscated and they were often humiliated and punished (Millward, 2021).

As a leading activist for international recognition of the Uyghurs' plight, Erkin's father, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, campaigned for the support of diaspora Uyghurs and called for the reestablishment of an independent Uyghur state of East Turkistan, as had existed under the short-lived East Turkistan Republics of 1933–1934 and 1944–1949. His son joined these efforts early in his life and continued his father's legacy after Isa Yusuf's death in 1995. Another notable early Uyghur activist was the historian-activist Muhammad Amin Bughra (1901–1965), who worked with Isa Yusuf Alptekin to advocate for the restoration of an independent East Turkistan and to write a political history of their homeland. Bughra and Alptekin published many books and articles arguing that the Uyghur people were Indigenous to the land (Alptekin, 1976, pp. 80–88, cited in Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, p. 98). Many Uyghurs in the diaspora still draw inspiration from this early activism to emphasise the history of Uyghurs and the issue of land and mobilization.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Türkiye became host to a large Uyghur diaspora community and a centre for Uyghur political activism. Türkiye and China were on opposite sides of the Cold War divide (Shichor, 2013). Turkish soldiers had fought against CCP troops in the Korean War and Türkiye did not establish diplomatic relations with China until 1971 (Shichor, 2009, pp. 9–12). Moreover, many Turkish politicians and civil society groups—especially conservative, nationalist and Pan-Turkist factions—viewed (and still view) the Uyghurs as their siblings in a large family of Turkic peoples with historical and cultural ties and a shared Turkic and Islamic identity. The

closeness in language and culture made it easier for Uyghurs to integrate in Türkiye than in other places outside Central Asia.

In no small part due to the ceaseless efforts of Isa Yusuf Alptekin, Uyghur communities established themselves in Istanbul. The first Uyghur Waqf (religious endowment), including its own mosque, was set up near Sultanahmet in Istanbul's historical center in 1960. Zeytinburnu in the west of the city, where Kazakh leather and fur workers had set up shop as early as in the 1920s and 1930s, became home to a large Uyghur community. One of its central streets, which today still features a large number of Uyghur restaurants, bakers, food stores and bookstores, is named after Isa Yusuf Alptekin. Many of the Uyghurs who settled in Istanbul were secular modernist and nationalist in orientation. More strongly conservative and religious Uyghurs began to settle in the southern Turkish city of Kayseri in 1965 (Page and Peker, 2015; Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018).

Although Türkiye offered a new home to Uyghurs, its government remained mostly passive in its support of Uyghur activism. Muslim majority countries outside Central Asia rarely showed much support for the cause of the Uyghurs or East Turkistan. Nevertheless, Bughra and Alptekin drew on the anti-colonial discourses of the time to engage with an international audience, forge alliances, and make their voices heard. They visited the Bandung Conference in 1955, the Afro-Asian Conferences in 1960 and 1965, and the World Congress of Islam in 1964 (Shichor, 2003, p. 290). With the passing of its first generation, Uyghur activism in Türkiye continued to develop and transform. Students who had participated in the 1980s student movement in Ürümqi – an important part of the wider student movement in China – set up the Eastern Turkistan Students Union (Doğu Türkistan Öğrenci Birliği) in Türkiye's capital Ankara in 1994, with the aim of rejuvenating Uyghur activism in the diaspora (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, pp. 93–94). The Kayseri-based Eastern Turkistan Cultural and Solidarity Association (Doğu Türkistan Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği) had been established five years earlier in 1989. Like some of the other organizations established in Türkiye, it had a more culturally conservative and religious agenda.

While these and other organisations that later emerged in Türkiye have continued to be of significance and have large membership bases (see Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, pp. 93–95), many descendants of the earlier activists, including Erkin Alptekin, settled in West Germany. Europe provided a more democratic setting for their work, as well as access to Euro-American funding and support for dissident movements in communist countries. Munich was the headquarters of Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe. These radio stations, created in 1950 to broadcast information to communist countries, were first financed by the CIA and the US State Department and later by the US Congress and National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The two stations merged in 1976. Since 1953, Uyghur activists have contributed to both the Uzbek (RFE, 2021) and Uyghur broadcast services, which were started in part with the work of Uyghur activists like Erkin Alptekin (Shichor, 2013). The Uyghur and Uzbek services moved to the newly formed Radio Free Asia in 1998.

By the late 1990s, the Chinese government was placing pressure on Türkiye to limit Uyghur diaspora activities. Combined with the formation of active groups in Western Europe—often organised by young politically active Uyghurs who had fled the region after the Ghulja

violence in 1997—this led to a shift in diaspora activities to Europe, notably Germany, as well as to North America from the late 1990s (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, pp. 94–5). Munich and Washington, DC soon became important centres of Uyghur activism.

### **Uyghur Activism in Europe and the United States**

In Europe and North America, Uyghur aspirations for an independent state met a new wave of Western-led ‘global’ financial and political institution building. This institution building was transforming and merging Cold War anti-communism with globalisation, multi-culturalism and developmentalist economic approaches into a new universalist, neoliberal rights-based frame. Attempting to establish themselves within this changing environment and to garner international recognition, support and funding, many Uyghur activists came to focus on human rights and minority rights while de-emphasizing claims to independence and turning away from their earlier structural critique associated with the Bandung Conference and anti-colonial politics.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw the establishment of a number of Uyghur institutions, many of which—or their heirs—continue to be important today. Germany-based Erkin Alptekin was co-founder of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization in 1991, which was established to empower marginalised peoples and protect their rights to self-determination (UNPO, n.d.). He and other early activists had been joined by Uyghurs who had left China in the 1980s and 1990s for political reasons, business, or study. In 1995, one of these figures, Dolkun Isa, who had been a student activist in Ürümqi, became one of the founders and driving forces in the World Uyghur Youth Congress (WUYC), which first convened in 1995 in Kazakhstan (Isa, 2022). Unable to establish a foothold in Central Asia the WUYC moved to Munich in 1996, where it would go on to merge with other Uyghur diaspora organizations to form the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) in 2004. Another former student leader from Ürümqi, Rushan Abbas, played a prominent role in the formation of the Uyghur American Association (UAA) in 1998 (Shichor, 2013). In 2004 the UAA received funding from the NED to set up the Uyghur Human Rights Project, a research-focused subsidiary that eventually became an independent non-profit organization in 2016.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2004, the UAA has been closely associated with the WUC. They have shared both funding and political direction, advocating for the strengthening of the autonomy of the XUAR and human rights. The East Turkistan National Congress (ETNC), established in Washington, DC in 1996, took a different direction. The ETNC was founded by another member of the Uyghur student movement in Ürümqi, Anwar Yusuf Turani, who insisted on fighting for full independence of East Turkistan. In 2004, it lost members to the newly formed WUC, leading Turani to co-found the East Turkistani Government in Exile (ETGE), from which he was later ousted in what he described as a “coup” (ETGE, n.d.). In the meantime, the ETNC was renamed the East Turkistan National Freedom Center and, under the direction of Turani and other activists, moved towards a research focus, albeit still with the ultimate aim of their mission being full Uyghur independence (ETNFC, n.d.).

Pursuing an internationally less controversial and softer political line than the ETGE, the WUC has received support and funding from Germany, which hosts the organisation, and the US,

which has funded many of its activities through the NED. In a much-cited publication, Kuşçu Bonnenfant (2018, p. 94) estimates the WUC to have up to 90 percent of Uyghur diaspora organizations under its umbrella. This might be the case among organisations in Europe and North America but is unlikely to be the case globally, especially in Türkiye and Central Asia. Nevertheless, the WUC soon became the most well-known Uyghur organisation in the West. Erkin Alptekin in Munich served as its first president from 2004 to 2006, when he was succeeded by the high-profile Uyghur businesswoman and activist Rebiya Kadeer in Washington, DC from 2006-2017 (WUC, 2009).<sup>6</sup> In Munich, Dolkun Isa took up the presidency in 2017; his leadership was reconfirmed without any rival candidate at the latest WUC meeting in Prague in October 2021.

Strategies used by the WUC have included online campaigning, lobbying at the United Nations, the EU, and among governments and politicians of individual states, and engaging with other NGOs and civil society groups. The main foci of its advocacy and awareness-raising activities have been human rights issues and minority rights. Following the 2007 adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), the WUC raised discussions among the community to adopt Indigenous rights as another political strategy (see Musapir & Roberts, 2022). The WUC has emphasised non-violence to distinguish itself from the Afghanistan-based East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which both China and the US considered a terrorist organisation in spite of serious doubts about its actual existence, and to gain support from the international community (Rustam and Meilani, 2021). The ETIM was recognized by the US as an international “terror organization” from 2002 to 2020 (Roberts, 2020b, pp. 75–86). Since 2003, China’s Ministry of Public Security has also designated the World Uyghur Congress as a terrorist organization and identified a list of Uyghur human rights activists, including Dolkun Isa, as terrorists (Wenweipo, 2003; Central People’s Government, 2008). As Isa (2022) describes in his recent autobiography, this has caused activists significant difficulties in gaining recognition on the international stage and much personal harm including arrest by the Italian Security Services in Rome in July 2017, and being continuously denied entrance into Türkiye.

### **Limited Participation**

The convergence of multiple groups into forming the WUC and the establishment of other umbrella and bridge-head organisations have demonstrated the ability of decentralized and spread-out Uyghur diaspora activists to come together to pool resources and knowledge for common goals. However, the level of participation in activism among Uyghurs in the diaspora had, until recently, remained relatively low, even though the diaspora continued to grow. Uyghurs who left China in the 1950s were joined in the 1980s and early 1990s by those fleeing persecution and violence, but also by those taking advantage of new opportunities to study and conduct business abroad afforded by China’s ‘opening up.’

After the flight of Uyghur student leaders in the late 1980s, the next significant wave of out-migration from Xinjiang occurred after 1997. Chinese authorities had launched a “Strike Hard” campaign and a “Maximum Pressure” policy in XUAR in 1997, following a Uyghur protest and uprising in Ghulja in February of that year which had been brutally suppressed (Dautcher, 2009).

The ensuing harsh clampdown by the authorities led to hundreds of deaths and subsequently thousands of arrests (Millward, 2021, pp. 331–334). This uprising had been the culmination of political tensions, dissatisfaction with discrimination and Han in-migration to the region, as well as nationalist aspirations among those who envisioned a Uyghur version of the Central Asian republics that had come into being after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Millward, 2021). These events and developments, as well as the opportunity of flight that the newly established Central Asian republics (especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) represented, led to increased migration of Uyghurs out of XUAR to Central Asia, Türkiye, Europe, and beyond.

The latest wave came just over a decade later. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, protests in Urumchi that began after an attack of two Uyghur factory workers in Guangdong by Han employees were met with heavy-handed police repression and spiralled into inter-ethnic violence in the streets of the capital, costing the lives of several hundred people (Dillon, 2020; Byler, 2021; Steenberg and Musapir, 2021, also discussed by Kuşçu Bonnenfant in this volume). The immediate crackdown, and the strengthening of surveillance, policing, and repression in the years that followed (Bovingdon, 2010, pp. 162–172; Dillon, 2015; Byler, 2021; Steenberg, 2021), led to a large number of Uyghurs fleeing the country. Many of those who left did so in order to be able to practice their religion more freely, fleeing what they experienced as religious repression (see Palmer, 2021). This wave continued throughout the first half of the 2010s and included a large number of Uyghurs being trafficked through Southeast Asia to Türkiye and the Middle East, as well as a substantial group unexpectedly receiving passports in a sudden and short-lived reversal of policy in 2015.

Yet, despite the growth in numbers, those who engaged in activism constituted only a small part of the Uyghur diaspora. Most Uyghurs abroad – including many of those who had fled persecution – did not speak out about their experiences in XUAR and distanced themselves from activists and sometimes each other. They were careful as they feared repercussions against themselves and their families and relatives in XUAR. The Chinese authorities exerted intense pressure on Uyghurs overseas by effectively holding their relatives in XUAR hostage to ensure their silence and sometimes cooperation. The harassment and persecution of members of Rebiya Kadeer’s family serves as a powerful example. Following her election as president of the WUC in May 2006, three of her children were detained and placed under house arrest; later that year two of her sons were sentenced for tax evasion, while a third was sentenced to nine years imprisonment for ‘subversion’ (Kadeer and Cavelius, 2009; see also RFA, 2017). It was common knowledge that some Uyghurs abroad had been coerced into spying on other Uyghurs (activists and nonactivists) for the Chinese government. Many therefore preferred to live quite isolated from other Uyghurs and were generally suspicious of each other.

In addition to protecting their families, young Uyghurs in particular were also concerned to protect their mobility. For those who lived abroad and had received green cards or permanent residency, their ability to return home to XUAR at any time was an important factor in why they kept silent and kept a distance from the older generations. There was also a privileged minority of Uyghurs still based in XUAR who were able to travel back and forth to other countries such as



Türkiye, Germany and Sweden, even after 2009. Although it was difficult for Uyghurs to receive a Chinese passport, those who were relatively privileged, notably the children of high-ranking government officials or the wealthy, still travelled and in some cases lived abroad for business and studies, sometimes receiving support and scholarships from the government. These Uyghurs were warned by the Chinese authorities not to engage with activism or activists in the diaspora. They stayed away from politics in an effort to protect their families' safety, wealth, business and reputation.

However, everything drastically changed in 2017 when China's 'People's War on Terror' reached its height. Increased repression in XUAR led to financial support for Uyghur diaspora organizations from the US, Dubai and Saudi Arabia. There was also increasing engagement in Uyghur issues among Western journalists and academics. But most important was a shift in activism among members of the Uyghur diaspora as the door to return home closed for all and channels of communication with relatives back home closed.

### **Breaking the Silence from 2017**

The last five years have witnessed intensive media coverage of the shocking reality of human rights atrocities against the region's Turkic peoples in XUAR. This coverage is a manifestation of increased engagement with Uyghur activism among diaspora members, many of whom have, since 2017, broken their silence to provide personal testimonies that have brought these atrocities to a global stage.

The initiation of the 'People's War on Terror' in May 2014 was a turning point in China's XUAR policy, adding new security measures and stringent surveillance that became ubiquitous across the region (Byler, 2018; Klimeš, 2018). After coming to power in August 2016, Party Secretary Chen Quanguo introduced the so called "grid management system" (Zenz and Leibold, 2017), which placed makeshift police stations every 50 or 100 metres in urban centers, ID checkpoints on all major roads, between neighbourhoods, and in public spaces, and thousands of surveillance cameras with facial recognition software connected to a centralised data system across the region (Scahill and Tate, 2021; Leibold, 2020). The distrust and fear created by this extensive surveillance left many people feeling they had no choice but to comply with rules requiring them to spy on their neighbours and report on their conduct. Based on this data, supplemented by older archives and a social credit scoring system, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other minority people were arrested and extra-judicially detained in 2017 and 2018.

They were first taken to detention centers for interrogation and processing. Some spent up to two years under horrendous conditions, confined to overcrowded cells lacking the most basic facilities, some shackled for weeks at a time, and subjected to violent interrogation and punishments (Byler, 2022a). They were gradually moved to proper prisons after sentencing or, in case of insufficient evidence for a conviction, into so-called re-education centers, which the Chinese authorities have variously represented as voluntary de-extremification schools or vocational training centers. In the two initial years of the mass incarceration, as many as one to two million people are estimated to have passed through a vast network of different kinds of camps

varying in size, severity and conditions.<sup>7</sup> A large number of minoritized people, including both camp detainees and others, have also been forced or coerced into working in factories, farms, and in municipal maintenance both within XUAR and across China (Murphy and Elimä, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Amnesty, 2021a).

In order to prevent news of these atrocities from becoming known across the world, the Chinese government heightened its already restrictive information policy. Many Uyghurs' passports were revoked, severe restrictions were imposed on travel abroad, and hundreds or thousands of Uyghurs and Kazakhs were called back from abroad often to then be detained. Strict limits were placed on communication and contact with anybody outside of China – in some cases even outside of XUAR. Starting in 2017, Uyghurs and Kazakhs in XUAR ceased almost all communication with relatives in the diaspora for periods of one, two, or even three or four years, either because they had been detained or because they feared that any communication with the outside world might lead to their detention.<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese government's efforts to curb the spread of information proved a double-edged sword. Cutting off communication between those at home and in the diaspora limited the outflow of information, hampering attempts to fully account for the atrocities. But it also served to undercut China's most effective means of control over Uyghurs abroad. Many of the openly active Uyghur activists had voluntarily severed ties with their relatives long before 2017 in order to protect them. Prominent veteran activists in the diaspora like Rebiya Kadeer, Dolkun Isa, Rushan Abbas, Nury Turkel, Mehmet Tohti, and many of the journalists working for Radio Free Asia had been disconnected from their families for many years (Lenberg, 2022, p. 8).<sup>9</sup> So too had many of the less prominent Uyghurs who had left their homelands for religious reasons or to flee repeated incarceration and personal persecution. Now, however, this extended to almost all Uyghur diaspora members.

Thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minoritized people abroad chose to break their silence and speak up for their relatives in XUAR, who they feared were being detained in camps and prisons or even to have been killed by the Chinese regime. The reasons for this are multifaceted. Personal grief, frustration, trauma, ethno-nationalism and religion all played a part. Loss of contact with their relatives caused great distress and psychological suffering as well as feelings of desperation (Vanderklippe, 2018). But as contact was cut off, so too was the control and restraint that the Chinese authorities had upheld through intimidation of Uyghurs overseas, pressure on their relatives and, in some cases, the threat of withholding privileges and mobility. While this did not reduce the fear or anxiety felt by Uyghurs in the diaspora, it released a considerable amount of frustrated energy, propelling a much larger number of people into activism and even more into speaking out and testifying for their relatives. It changed the logic of what was felt to be the best course of action in order to help and protect relatives in XUAR.

When Rune Steenberg conducted fieldwork in 2018 in Istanbul, he was surprised by the large number of Uyghurs approaching him to testify about their families, agreeing to state their full names and to be recorded on audio and video. This represented a clear and general shift from previous years where testimonies had been difficult to find and almost impossible to record for

publishing. Now most went on record. Many repeated the same sentiment: “We don’t know if our loved ones are dead or alive.” Whereas they had earlier deemed silence to be the best strategy, many diaspora Uyghurs had begun to see advocacy as the best way to try to find information about their families and to protect them. After losing contact to their families, speaking out now seemed to be the best option.

### **New activists, new solidarities**

In addition to providing testimonies, some previously silent diaspora members also realized the necessity of a more systematic type of activism that could bring international attention to the human rights atrocities in the Uyghur region. This meant that the Uyghur activist movement was augmented by a generation of young, well-educated, dynamic Uyghurs who were well integrated in their host countries in Europe, Türkiye, North America, Australia, and elsewhere (Lenberg, 2022). This growing body of activists, who focused primarily on personal experiences and human rights abuses, could not be as easily dismissed as ‘radicals,’ ‘terrorists,’ or ‘extremists’ by the Chinese government. They also had better access to the ears, hearts and minds of an international audience. With fresh memories of life as relatively protected and privileged elites in XUAR prior to 2017, these activists were now (publicly) re-thinking their identity and belonging and offering nuanced perspectives on the discrimination against and persecution of Uyghurs back home. Many were active in their host countries, operating as individuals rather than as part of any larger organisation.

One example of this new kind of activist is Halmurat Uyghur, a young medical practitioner and acupuncturist living in Finland with his family, who became one of the first and most prominent Uyghurs to take up activism on behalf of their families.<sup>10</sup> He had been living in the Uyghur diaspora for years without any involvement in global Uyghur politics, until “fate hunted me down after my parents were sent to a Chinese prison camp in Xinjiang” (Uyghur, 2019). Halmurat was only one of several young Uyghur activists to emerge as a reaction to the XUAR mass incarceration of 2017, including (among others) Dilnur Reyhan, Ferkat Jewdat, Kuzzat Altay, Semira Imin and Rayhan Asat. With the exception of Rebiya Kadeer and Rushan Abbas, the majority of Uyghur activists in the past were male. But with the renewed wave of activism starting in 2017, we have begun to see more young female Uyghurs engaging in public discourses and amplifying their voices, telling their life stories. Examples include prominent anthropologist Rahile Dawut’s daughter Akida Polat and Ilham Tothi’s daughter Jewher Ilham, both of whom have given speeches at the Oslo Freedom Forum.<sup>11</sup> Arguably, they have played a vital role in bringing worldwide attention to the plights of Uyghur, Kazakh and other Turkic peoples in XUAR via reputable international media outlets.

These new activists were crucial in making the Uyghur and Kazakh suffering in XUAR, the system of camps, the surveillance, securitisation, and exploitation known to the world. They were also central to creating solidarity within the Uyghur diaspora. By moving from a position of disengagement or chosen silence to one of active participation in Uyghur diaspora politics and activism, the new Uyghur activists, along with the now un-muted relatives of the disappeared,

contributed to uniting a diaspora that had previously been divided and fragmented by suspicion and fear. The common experience of loss and suffering built solidarity across the divides that had been created by the Chinese government through their silencing strategies, as well as those caused by generational, educational, religious, local, and ideological differences. Indiscriminate and unpredictable arrests of relatives in XUAR and the loss of contact with their families, effectively levelled the playing field for most Uyghurs abroad. With the feeling of sitting in the same boat and having had most privileges by the Chinese government removed, the grounds for mutual suspicion and envy subsided significantly, while the drive to organise and support each other rose. New Uyghur activist organisations were founded and grew quickly between 2018 and 2020, including the Uyghur Entrepreneurs Network, Uyghur Aid in Finland, Uyghur Hjelp in Norway, Biz Bir in Istanbul and the Campaign for Uyghurs (Szadziewski, 2020). While the new activists visible in the Western media and on online platforms were often from a similar demographic of young, well-educated and well-integrated professionals, the movement of people speaking up, motivated by the loss of contact with their families, was much broader.

Solidarity and cooperation also grew between the Uyghur and Kazakh diasporas. Kazakh camp survivors who were able to exit China for Kazakhstan and later able to take refuge in other countries have provided some of the most vivid and powerful testimonial evidence. The Uyghur population of XUAR is roughly six times that of the Kazakh population and there have probably been manyfold more Uyghurs in the camps than Kazakhs. However, greater numbers of Kazakh detainees have managed to leave China after release. This is especially the case for Kazakhstani nationals and those with spouses and family in Kazakhstan who campaigned on their behalf. Therefore, the Uyghur diaspora community and activists have heavily drawn on Kazakh survivors' testimonies. Serikzhan Bilash, a Kazakh activist then based in Kazakhstan who was since forced to flee the country, paved the way for community-based activism, collecting testimonies and documentation from both Uyghurs and Kazakhs whose family members had disappeared, and then from released detainees. Working alongside other volunteers at the Atajurt Kazakh Human Rights Organization, Bilash demonstrated community-based solidarity despite the differences between the ethnic communities. He was arrested by the Kazakh authorities in 2019 and freed shortly thereafter on condition that he cease his activism or face seven years in prison (SCMP, 2019). In 2020 he left Kazakhstan for Türkiye only to eventually settle in Washington DC from where he continues to broadcast and collect information. In his absence others have continued Atajurt in Almaty and documentation work elsewhere (Kaşıkçı, 2020). This includes The Xinjiang Victims Database (shahit.biz), a comprehensive, cross referenced, evidential archive that had documented the cases of over 56,000 disappeared victims as of March 2023. Its founder Gene Bunin started the database while cooperating closely with Bilash and Atajurt, both have provided source information for numerous works of research and journalism around the world. Bunin has publicly stated that without the work of Atajurt there would likely be no Xinjiang Victims Database (Kaşıkçı, 2020). Sadly, following disputes between Bilash and the WUC and other Uyghur activist groups, not least over the naming of the advocacy platform known as the Uyghur Tribunal, conflicts and rifts have appeared between Kazakh and Uyghur activists.

The late 2010s and early 2020s also brought increased solidarity and collaboration with activists from other diasporas and groups whose people are facing repression under the CCP, such as Tibetans, Hong Kong protesters, Taiwanese, Mongolians, Falun Gong followers and Christians. It became particularly visible when a coalition of Uyghur, Tibetan and Hong Kong activists called for a boycott on the 2022 Beijing Olympics under the hashtag #NoBeijing2022 (O'Donnell, 2022). They came together to make campaign videos, share testimonies, and protest at the UN office in Geneva. Additionally, decentralized, online social campaigns have become important, some of which speak to broader human rights issues in China.

### **Personalised, Family-Focused Activism**

The difference between activism before and after 2017 not only lies in the number of people and demographic segment involved, but also in its form. Between 2017 and 2021, Uyghur activism became much more focused around personal stories. Some testimonies, particularly the accounts of camp survivors, were spectacular, but many were more mundane and quotidian in their tragedy. They were about the loss of loved ones and fears about their whereabouts and condition. Social media platforms including Twitter, YouTube and Facebook abounded with personal testimonies of Uyghurs and Kazakhs, before they also started to appear in major media outlets and agencies such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, Al Jazeera and Associated Press. New activists like physician Halmurat Uyghur, lawyer Rayhan Asat, and software engineer Ferkat Jewdat, made personal heartfelt pleas about their missing mothers, siblings, and fathers. Well known intellectuals like Abduweli Ayup and Tahir Hamut IZgil joined this grassroots movement, providing public testimonies in major news outlets (Al Jazeera, 2019; IZgil, 2021). Uyghur activists working for Radio Free Asia, in some cases for nearly twenty years, including Shohret Hoshur, Mamatjan Juma and Gulchehra Hoja, also came forward to tell the personal stories of the detentions of their family members (RFA, 2022).

In addition to being used to compile comprehensive reports (e.g. Amnesty, 2021a), these testimonies were very important in garnering international sympathy and support by personalising the stories of oppression. Video testimonies were particularly powerful. They showed Uyghurs and Kazakhs holding their loved ones' pictures and talking about mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, husbands and children. The tears in their eyes, the desperation in their faces, the helplessness in their voices made them deeply relatable. These narratives, which have been collected on YouTube channels of Uyghur Pulse (part of the Xinjiang Victims Database), Atajurt and many other organisations and individuals, have raised global public awareness of the Uyghurs' plight to a greater degree than ever before.

Digital media has been central to the establishment of this community activism. NurMuhammad et al.'s (2016) research shows that social media sites like Facebook were already providing an important platform for constructing a transnational Uyghur identity and community. These existing digital spaces and online community networks provided a fertile soil and a crucial space for the family-focused activist movement. A turning point came in February 2019, when rumours spread within the Uyghur diaspora that folk singer and Dutar-player Abdurehim Héyit

had died in a camp in XUAR. This provoked great outrage, especially in Türkiye where his music is much loved. In response to these rumours the Chinese authorities released a video of the singer in which he assures the audience that he is alive and has not been abused in any way. Halmurat and other Uyghur activists took this as an opportunity to demand similar proof-of-life videos of their relatives in XUAR. Halmurat coined the hashtag #MeTooUyghur and its Uyghur version #menmuuyghur, to mark such demands (see Yang, 2019). Hashtag activism has gained significant traction in the last decade, fostering spaces for movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, and enabling marginalized peoples to share information and engage with social justice movements (Jackson, 2018). In using the #MeToo campaign for their own purposes, Uyghurs connected their plight to a movement that had captured the attention of Western audiences (Jaffe, 2018).

#MeTooUyghur went viral, with Uyghurs and non-Uyghurs across the globe joining the movement. Later Halmurat added the hashtag #whereismyfamily. Thousands of Uyghurs had previously shared heartfelt, traumatic stories of disappeared family members, loved ones, the destruction of family, and the discrimination they had endured for simply being “born Uyghur.” The #MeTooUyghur and #whereismyfamily movements prompted Uyghurs to engage in family-focused activism by making video messages that made direct demands to the Chinese state of releasing their family or allowing communication with them (Jakhar, 2019). Activists have systematically curated this content on YouTube or as repositories independent of the larger Uyghur diaspora associations (see e.g. Kuzzat Altay, n.d.). In response to these videos, Chinese officials developed an elaborate propaganda campaign. Thousands of videos of Uyghurs denying abuses against their community have been posted on Twitter and YouTube (Kao et al., 2021). In clearly curated and probably coerced videos, family members of activists claimed to live good and free lives and smeared their activist relatives, undermining their credibility and accusing them of lying (UHRP, 2021).

### **Released relatives**

Compared to the older generation of activists who were deeply committed to their political ideologies, the new activists were to a large extent ‘pushed’ into activism for complex, often very personal reasons. Some, including Halmurat, continued their activism after the release of their family members, consciously cutting their ties to them to avoid Chinese manipulation, as the older generation of activists had done before them. Many, however, stopped once family members had been released, or after receiving pleas from their family members in XUAR to cease the activism. Some have even asked documentation platforms to remove the testimonies they had previously given or to erase the records of their relatives’ detentions. From what we have observed through online discussions, it seems that most Uyghurs show understanding of and empathy for the immense pressure, intimidation, and coercion that these activists face. The intimidation has been especially fear-provoking for refugees who do not yet have legal status (Bradley and Abdusalam, 2022). Since family-focused activism is centered on the individual, each person has to make their own decision about what is best for them. At the same time, community members are also

disheartened about losing young, well-educated activists fluent in English or the languages of their host countries who have been speaking directly to the Western media.

As some such activists have gone silent, the sustainability of the current movement has been called into question. Some diaspora members have again been granted privileges by the Chinese government including communication with their relatives, money transfers from China, passport extension abroad (the Chinese embassy in Ankara has recently re-started processing passports for Uyghurs) and in some cases Uyghurs and Kazakhs from XUAR have even been allowed to travel abroad for study and business. This has created much debate in activist circles and in the diaspora more broadly.

Online discussions suggest that Uyghur diaspora members are divided on the question of whether, going ahead, the focus should be on family and repression, on Uyghur independence and a Uyghur state or indeed on Islam – although many agree that these foci are not mutually exclusive. Family-focused activism has been enormously important in drawing international attention and support but has proved vulnerable to the intimidation and pressure exerted by the Chinese authorities and to the shift in circumstances. Politically or religiously focused activism is more stable and less easy for the Chinese to manipulate but is also more likely to be dismissed as radicalism or extremism by the Chinese, garners less international solidarity, and mobilises fewer people.

China's tactics of silencing and sowing distrust in the diaspora had previously fragmented and limited activist labour. The period from 2017 to 2020 witnessed stronger solidarity among Uyghurs, as well as enhanced publicity and funding opportunities. However, while the increased attention and funding remain at present, the solidarity has, in part, been weakened and the structure of the diaspora is once again changing. This is due to shifts in China's tactics to intimidate and silence the Uyghur diaspora. Particularly important has been the release of many Uyghurs from the camps and the reinstatement of communication between Uyghurs at home and abroad, albeit in a highly controlled and severely limited way, as well as the restoration of certain privileges for parts of the diaspora. It is also due to the Uyghur case now being used in international geo-politics and in internal political battles in countries such as Türkiye, Indonesia, the US, and the UK, which also has created divisions, value splits and conflicting loyalties within the Uyghur diaspora, especially in Türkiye and the US

The role of religion is still a major point of contention, possibly more so than ever with secularised and conservative Uyghurs becoming increasingly polarised. The question of whether the activist movement should lobby for independence, focus on family separations and human rights abuses, or even pursue a military path continues to divide opinions, efforts and organisations. The question of whether Uyghurs should be fighting for independence or only strengthened autonomy—a question that proved very divisive in the 1990s and 2000s—no longer seems to be an issue. As a lasting impact of the state violence of 2017–2020, no Uyghur organisation and hardly any individual publicly supports only autonomy. At the same time, the number of Uyghurs staying out of online debates and the media spotlight, trading with China, and enjoying privileges in mobility and communication, is once again rising—as too is mutual suspicion. This present new

phase of transformation will define the institutions, functions and divisions of the Uyghur diaspora in the years to come.

### **Conclusion**

Uyghur activism in the diaspora has seen considerable, complex developments and transformations since the Alptekin family fled from XUAR after the CCP took power in 1949. Isa Yusuf Alptekin, Muhammad Amin Bughra, and other early activists brought with them into exile a very recent memory of a unified nation of East Turkistan, which had fallen only a few years before at the founding of the PRC. Their push for full independence was also pursued in the midst of the Cold War, when anti-communist and anti-colonial discourses offered frameworks for international engagement and advocacy. Their focus on sovereignty has remained an undercurrent throughout the ensuing decades of Uyghur diaspora activism, but the geopolitical context, frameworks, and strategies for activism significantly changed in the decades that followed their visit in Bandung. This became evident in the agenda of the new Uyghur activist organisations formed in Europe and North America in the 1990s and early 2000s, which were founded by descendants of the early activists and Uyghurs who left China in the 1980s and 1990s. While the ETNC continued to call for an independent East Turkistan, other organisations including the WUC and UAA shifted the emphasis of their claims from independence and sovereignty to autonomy and self-determination as they engaged with the now dominant universalist frameworks of human right and minority rights. However, it has been developments in the homeland that have most fundamentally changed the complex landscape of diaspora activism, specifically the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in 2017 and 2018, and the interruption of most communication between Uyghurs abroad and in XUAR.

Observing Uyghur diaspora activism over the past decades gives us an insight into the strong influences on diaspora activism of both shifting geo-political constellations and crucial events and developments within the lands of origin. It also demonstrates how a focus on personal motivation and family, rather than on political ideologies or ideological aims, has a potential to mobilise, strengthen solidarity and gain international sympathy. But it also shows how vulnerable such a personal focus makes the movement to changes in circumstance and manipulation by the oppressor state. Between 2017 and 2020, Uyghur diaspora activism transformed from a relatively organized, if de-centralised, movement led by a relatively small group of activists committed to human rights and the right to self-determination held by the Uyghur people, to a much broader grassroots movement calling for the freedom of family members and highlighting personal stories and experiences of human rights abuses. For close to four years, the number of politically active Uyghurs increased manifold and the demography of activists changed to include people from all walks of life, including young, mobile, and well-educated Uyghurs and established professionals. With thousands of testimonies, stories, and documents in the public domain, and the mounting evidence uncovered by journalists and researchers (e.g. Amnesty International, 2021a; Byler, 2022a), the Uyghur suffering and Chinese abuses in XUAR have become much more widely



known and have gathered both political and financial support in the West, Türkiye, Middle East, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and other places.

Much research remains to be done to properly understand these current processes and debates. In particular, there is a need for comparative work with other diasporic and social movements as well as national liberation movements. The continuities, complexities, and nuanced differences between different generations of Uyghur activism in Türkiye, Europe, and North America needs further long-term ethnographic research, as does its connections to the history of Uyghur activism in Central Asia. These future avenues of research will help us to more fully unpack the development and transformation of Uyghur activism within the diaspora over the past seventy years.

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<sup>2</sup> The region is today named Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) by the PRC government who has held authority over it since 1949. However, is known to many Uyghurs outside China as the Uyghur Homelands (weten) or East Turkistan. It has had many names over the past centuries. Parts of it have been known as Kashgaria, Turkistan, Tarim, Altishahr [Alte Sheher] and Dzungaria [Zhungaria] among other names. It was colonized by the Manchu Qing in the 18th century under the name of Xiyu (Western Regions). The Russians called it East Turkistan in distinction to the western part of Central Asia, West Turkistan, that they colonised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1881, after a brief period of independence, the Qing reconquered the region and renamed it Xinjiang (new dominion/colony), a name the Republic of China kept and the PRC incorporated into its current name XUAR. For purposes of ease and legal precision, but also to mark that we consider the region to rightfully belong (though not exclusively) to the Uyghur people, we have throughout this article chosen to use the designation XUAR to describe the region.

<sup>3</sup> The German Bundestag's Research Services distinguishes between two notions of genocide, physical and social, and determined that while the evidence does not suggest a genocide against the Uyghurs in the physical interpretation applied by most international courts, it does suggest genocide when interpreted as social destruction, as applied by the German Bundesgerichtshof (BGH).

<sup>4</sup> On China's use of the US-led global war on terror to target and suppress Uyghur activism through its so-called People's War on Terror, see Roberts, 2020a.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the NED also went on to fund the organisation, Campaign for Uyghurs, which was founded by Rushan Abbas in 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Kadeer held various official positions in China before being arrested in 1999 on the charge of sharing state secrets. After her release from prison in 2005, she left for the United States. For an autobiographical account of her life see Kadeer and Cavelius, 2009. See also the documentary *The 10 Conditions of Love*.

<sup>7</sup> This estimate is based on leaked documents, satellite images of camps, and oral testimonies both from former detainees and teachers from camps.

<sup>8</sup> As of December 2022, a search on the Xinjiang Victims Database (shahit.biz) for cases with the detention reason "contact with the outside world" brought up 252 results. See also Haitiwaji and Morgat, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Nury Turkel, a Uyghur-American lawyer and human rights advocate, came to the U.S. from XUAR as a student in 1995. For an account of his life see Turkel (2022). Mehmet Tohti, a co-founder of the WUC, is the Executive Director of the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project based in Ottawa, Canada. He left China in 1991 and settled in Canada in 1998.

<sup>10</sup> For further examples of family-focused activism, see also Braver and Barton, 2015; Bradley and Abdusalam, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Akida Pulat's speech "A Daughter's Call for Justice" was presented at the forum in 2021. Jewher Ilham's speech "Until Every Uyghur is Free" was presented at the forum in 2022.