

Uyghur Diaspora Activism in the US

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1 Introduction

Ever since the takeover of East Turkestan (Xinjiang) by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Uyghurs of the region have been agitating for an independent state separate from China. Uyghur diaspora activism proceeded in three distinct phases focused around three different places and framing surrounding them. (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, p. 90) They began first with migration to Turkey in the 1950s to the 1990s and based their operations primarily there. However, some activists moved on to Germany and Western Europe generally from Turkey, beginning the basis for diaspora activism in those countries as well. (Shichor, 2013, p. 618) This shift was primarily accelerated by the fall of the Soviet Union and Turkish passivity beginning in the 1990s. The third phase of Uyghur diaspora activism is their move to the US and this final phase one which will be the focus and the unique place that the United States occupies in Uyghur diaspora activism.

First an overview of general Uyghur diaspora activism strategies and framing will be provided, followed up by a section on the Chinese reprisals against those activities. Finally, the United States as a base of operations for Uyghur activism, its comparison to other countries, and the successes of activism will be discussed.

2 Uyghur Diaspora Activism

2.1 Timeline

Beginning their activities in Turkey, the primary strategy and framing Uyghur activists used in Turkey was to emphasize their Turkic ethnic identity and Muslim religious identity to garner support for their movement. (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, p. 91) The creation of a strong separate national identity was important to maintain a cohesive unit in a group which was now scattered across the globe, and it allowed Uyghur activists to Unfortunately, this time period in Turkish society was an inopportune time for such discussion as it was the same time period as the government's building of a Turkish national identity building project, therefore building a separate national identity was not allowed. Thus, Turkey did not provide extensive support for the movement, but it remained the best place to organize and build the base for a wider movement still because of their common ethnic root and Muslim identity.

The fall of the Soviet Union was a significant event for the development of Uyghur diaspora activism because of multiple factors. First was that it resulted in the creation of many new Central Asian states with a common national background, which boosted the fervor amongst Uyghur nationalist for a separate

East Turkestan. (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, p. 90) Secondly, there was a move away from Turkey to Europe, especially Germany where Uyghur activist leaders set up new organizations such as the World Uyghur Congress, (WUC) or Eastern Turkestan National Congress (ETNC) as a result of Turkey giving into Chinese demands to crack down on their Uyghur activists. (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018; Shichor, 2013) Finally, another major shift was that after the end of the Cold War, the discussion of the importance of human rights became more prominent. This resulted in the shift in the framing of their issues from their separate ethnic identity as Uyghurs and their Muslim identity being erased by the Chinese government, to a right-based discussion where the Uyghurs' human rights were being violated in Xinjiang.

Finally, in the third phase after the 2000s, along with Uyghur diaspora movement, the activism has also spread to the United States where two prominent activist organizations were founded: The Uyghur American Association (UAA) and the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP). (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018; Shichor, 2013; Szadziewski, 2020) Transitioning to regions such as Europe and Northern America helped with the new framing as these were countries that were open to activism in their countries as well as support of human rights around the world. This time period was when the internet usage was widely adopted, allowing for easier spread of information for the movement. (Clothey et al., 2016; Vergani and Zuev, 2011)

2.2 Activities in the US

Uyghur diaspora activism in the US can be divided into two, organized activism and grassroots activism. As for organized activism, the aforementioned two prominent Uyghur activist organizations, the UAA and UHRP, were both founded in the US, using different strategies to achieve their goal, but being organized in a similar top-down structure. Grassroots activism can take shape in many different forms and on different platforms. The most significant tool at their disposal is definitely the internet, and on the internet the type of content produced can vary significantly still.

The UAA is primarily focused on the political organization of the Uyghur diaspora and the preservation of Uyghur identity amongst the diaspora in the US. On the other hand, the UHRP is focused on research on the status of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, providing reports, and policy recommendations. (Szadziewski, 2020, p. 213) These organizations both lobby the local and federal government for passing policy on the promotion of human rights in China. It should be noted as well that these two organizations are both part of the World Uyghur Congress which aims to be the international representative for Uyghur interests. (Shichor, 2013, p. 618) This helps to promote a sense of Uyghur identity across the diaspora which are spread out across the world, allowing for dialogue between them, and make sure that their interests and goals align.

As for the grassroots activism, the main tool at their disposal other than protests has been the internet. (Clothey et al., 2016; Szadziewski, 2020; Vergani and Zuev, 2011) In modern times, the internet has emerged as space for the "unifying emotional bases" of ethnic identity. (Vergani and Zuev, 2011, p. 208) This is done through videos that promote Uyghur culture and language, as well as those that have a direct political message to them. An interesting point to note is that the messaging of videos and content differ based on the target

audience. For example, Turkish language content or content aimed at Uyghurs in Turkey often use religion and Pan-Turkist language in their messaging, while in media aimed towards Western countries, there is much more cultural content. (Vergani and Zuev, 2011, p. 226) So for the US audience, the Uyghur struggle is framed as a struggle to maintain a coherent Uyghur identity and human rights as a minority, rather than an overt Islamic messaging since the audience may not be sympathetic to political Islam.

3 Transnational Repression

As a way to counteract the rise in Uyghur activism abroad, the PRC has employed a variety of tactics across the globe. First they frame Uyghur activism as separatism which threatens the fundamental territorial integrity of China. After the 9/11 attack and the start of "Global War on Terror," the Chinese government has begun framing Uyghur nationalists as Islamist terrorists as well. (Shichor, 2013, p. 615) With this framing in mind, China began to accuse countries with a sizable Uyghur activist population of harboring terrorists and separatists harming China's internal interests. As mentioned before, one of their main targets was Turkey, and Turkey began to shut down many activities of their local community as a result of pressure from China. (Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2018, p. 94)

The Uyghurs who've moved to other countries more resistant to Chinese demands still faced reprisals for their activities. For example, the sizable German Uyghur population, while not facing the same threats of their activities being shut down, still faced pressure from China. In 2013, China would release a list of Eastern Turkestan terrorists and terrorist organizations, two persons and two organizations would be those based in Germany. (Shichor, 2013, p. 620) Munich, a city in which majority of Germany's Uyghur reside, also opened up a general consulate there, after which China used its personnel there to raise the issue of the Uyghur activities constantly with the city officials. Despite China being able to escalate the issue to more direct economic action against Germany, they have restrained against doing so, so as to not damage the emerging Sino-German relations. (Shichor, 2013, p. 628)

Those in the US, also face reprisals but in forms such as harassment and anonymous threats which are often attributed to the Chinese Communist Party. (Szadziewski, 2020, p. 615; UHRP, 2019) These threats include threatening to detain the activists' family members still residing in Xinjiang, personal threats of harm against family members in the US, or "doxxing" where personal information is revealed to the public.

The difference between these various countries with a similar case of Uyghur activists in their territory, yet having different experiences with Chinese pressure highlights the importance of the location of a diaspora activist's location. When Turkey succumbed to Chinese pressure to crackdown on their Uyghur activists, Germany did not have to be forced into a decision against their Uyghurs. Although it should be noted that while Germany did not specifically stop their Uyghur activists, so as to not damage their own relations with China as well, neither have they given direct support to the Uyghur cause with legislation or political statement on the federal level. (Shichor, 2013, p. 629) The U.S. was a similar case, while there was a trade war between the US and China, the issue

of Uyghur was never the main driving force behind China's decision to engage in it.

4 Uyghurs in the United States

The United States has emerged as a unique space for Uyghur diaspora activists because of its predominance in political, economic, and military power in the world. (Szadziewski, 2020, p. 217) Despite the reprisals and threats mentioned in the previous section, the civic space in the US is still open enough to allow for American Uyghur organizations such as the UAA and UHRP to have the space to operate by organizing protests, conducting research, and lobby the government to pass promotion of Uyghur human rights policies. Whereas in Germany, there was no direct action from the parliament on the Uyghur issue, the US, especially during the Trump administration, passed two major pieces of legislation which paralleled the language of the recommendations from NGOs and activists. (Szadziewski, 2020, p. 215)

In addition to legislation which directly mentions the human rights of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the calls from Uyghur activist groups and individuals have led several congressional representatives to further adopt policies to protect activists from "political influence operations" specifically from the Chinese Communist Party. (Szadziewski, 2020, p. 215) Many activists hope that these acts could serve as a basis for the development of similar bills in other countries, especially since they have received overseas praise from other countries such as Canada and the UK, but right now it does not seem to be the case.

As for grassroots activism, the majority of Uyghur language content is uploaded from Uyghurs in the US, and they range from cultural content to political content as well. The civic space in the US allows for the operation of online media platforms such as Youtube, loose regulation on the internet so such content could be uploaded, as well as privacy protection for individuals uploading political content. (Clothey et al., 2016; Lenberg, 2022; Vergani and Zuev, 2011) These contents have a double function. First is that they maintain Uyghur identity in the US by providing a space for Uyghur identity online within the group, but also display Uyghur culture and inform the public outside the group.

Because of all these factors, the US occupies a unique space in human rights activism in the Uyghur diaspora. The US has the economic, political, and military power to withstand pressure from the Chinese government, and allow for the maintenance of an open civic space domestically for Uyghur organizations and activists. Furthermore, Uyghur activists can see their policy recommendations translate into reality due to the responsiveness of their representatives, and a sizable part of Congress who sees China as a clear competitor to the US.

5 Conclusion

Uyghur activists in the diaspora have traveled across the world and in every community they established continued their activism, adopting different rhetoric to support their cause. In the US, the adoption of human rights clearly helped their cause garner much more support and even resulted in the passing of multiple bills both promoting human rights in Xinjiang and protecting human rights

activists domestically. Nearly every country the Uyghurs found themselves in, they have faced reprisals from the Chinese government, and these communities have dealt with this pressure in different ways. In Turkey, they gave in to the pressure, in Germany, this pressure resulted in inaction, and finally in the US, they passed bills to specifically protect Uyghurs and other activists from CCP inference. This shows why the US is an important location for Uyghur diaspora activists since it is one of the few countries who have the international prestige and influence to withstand Chinese pressure and even directly challenge them on the human rights violation in their borders.

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