

Opinion – The Colonial Roots of the Ongoing Uyghur Genocide

Written by Salih Hudayar

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SALIH HUDAYAR, MAR 28 2025

For over a decade, the world has witnessed mounting evidence of internment camps, forced sterilizations, family separations, religious and cultural persecution, organ harvesting, forced labor, and high-tech surveillance emerging from East Turkistan—an occupied nation China refers to as the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.” These atrocities, targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples, have led multiple governments, including the United States, to designate China’s actions as genocide, while the United Nations has identified them as crimes against humanity. The genocide of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other Turkic peoples is routinely framed as mere human rights violation or a symptom of authoritarian overreach. Such framing obscures the root cause: the illegal occupation and ongoing colonization of East Turkistan by China. To end the genocide and achieve lasting peace, dignity, and justice for the East Turkistani people, the world must recognize that this is not a question of human rights or religious persecution—it is a colonial crisis. And like all colonial projects, it demands not reform, but an end.

East Turkistan, home to the Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic peoples, has a long and distinct sovereign history, culture, and identity separate from that of China. While the Manchu Qing Empire occupied the nation in 1759, Qing occupation over East Turkistan has never been continuous or consensual. The people of East Turkistan persistently resisted, launching 42 uprisings between 1759 and 1864, and regained independence as the State of Yette Sheher (1864–1877), before being re-occupied by the Qing Empire in December 1877.

In 1884, Beijing renamed the country “Xinjiang” (meaning “New Territory”)—a colonial term imposed to normalize its conquest, and Chinese settlers were encouraged to alter the nation’s demographics. These were not merely administrative measures—they were calculated steps in the construction of a colonial regime. Yet, the people of East Turkistan continued to resist the occupation and sought to re-establish their independence.

The people of East Turkistan re-declared their independence twice in the 20th century—in 1933 and again in 1944—establishing the East Turkistan Republic. before falling victim to geopolitical deals and military occupation. Both republics were short-lived, undermined by geopolitical maneuvering and military aggression. In 1949, following the Chinese Communist Party’s rise to power, the People’s Liberation Army invaded East Turkistan with Soviet support. Under the pretext of “peaceful liberation,” the PLA dismantled East Turkistan’s sovereignty and imposed a colonial regime that persists today.

Since then, Beijing has implemented long-term strategies aimed at erasing East Turkistan’s national identity and integrating the nation into its Han-centric nation-building project. These strategies have included mass settlement of Han Chinese colonists, criminalization of East Turkistani history and identity, suppression of cultural and religious freedoms, the dismantling of native institutions, and the violent suppression of dissent. Although some observers refer to these policies as “assimilation,” such language understates the scope and violence of China’s actions. This is not cultural integration—it is national erasure and demographic replacement.

The ongoing Uyghur genocide is the latest phase in this decades-long campaign. It has moved beyond political repression into a full-fledged effort to destroy the East Turkistani nation physically, culturally, and psychologically. Millions of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic peoples have been arbitrarily detained in concentration

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camps, where they are subjected to indoctrination, torture, sexual violence, and forced labor. Furthermore, experts estimate that at least 25,000 to 50,000 Uyghurs are being killed annually solely for their organs. Uyghur and other Turkic women are forcibly sterilized or forced to undergo abortions to prevent the birth of future generations. Over a million Uyghur and other Turkic children are separated from their families and placed in state-run boarding schools designed to sever their cultural and linguistic ties. Over 16,000 Mosques, cemeteries, and historic sites have been demolished, while Uyghur and other Turkic language instruction has been eliminated from public education.

In international law, these actions meet the criteria outlined in the UN Genocide Convention. China's campaign fulfills all five of the acts defined as genocide. This includes killing members of the group through executions, massacres, deaths resulting from torture and neglect in concentration camps, and systematic organ harvesting. It also involves causing serious bodily or mental harm, through forced labor, indoctrination, physical and sexual abuse, and long-term psychological trauma. The Chinese regime has deliberately inflicted conditions of life calculated to bring about the group's physical destruction, including mass internment, surveillance, forced separation of families, and deprivation of basic needs. Additionally, China has imposed measures intended to prevent births, such as forced sterilizations, abortions, birth prevention policies, and the destruction of Uyghur family structures. Finally, it has forcibly transferred children of the group to another group by removing over a million Uyghur and other Turkic children from their families and placing them in Chinese state-run boarding schools and orphanages.

What makes this genocide even more insidious is its bureaucratic and technological sophistication. The CCP uses AI surveillance, biometric data collection, and big data policing to monitor and control every aspect of East Turkistani life. Genocide in East Turkistan is not committed with bombs or mass graves—it is executed with facial recognition cameras, QR codes, “predictive policing” apps, forced sterilizations, forced abortions, organ harvesting, and crematoriums to hide the evidence.

The answer lies not in ideology alone but in geopolitical calculation. East Turkistan is central to Beijing's global ambitions. It serves as the strategic linchpin of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which China seeks to reshape global trade and influence. Over 60 percent of China's overland trade passes through the region. Rich in oil, natural gas, gold, lithium, and rare earth elements, East Turkistan is not only a corridor—but a resource base essential to China's industrial economy.

Chinese strategists have long seen East Turkistan as a buffer protecting the Chinese state from perceived threats to its west and north. This logic continues to shape Beijing's approach today: the occupation of East Turkistan is central to advancing China's geopolitical ambitions, including control over critical infrastructure, access to Central Asia, and the stability of its broader colonial system. The erasure of East Turkistan is not about internal security—it is about imperial consolidation and expansion.

The Uyghur genocide is therefore not a domestic or regional issue—it is an international one. It is rooted in a colonial model of domination that has broad implications for global security, trade, and human rights. Yet the international community continues to treat East Turkistan as a part of China's “internal affairs,” even as it condemns the crimes taking place there. This contradiction lies at the heart of the global failure to stop the genocide.

By framing the issue merely as one of “human rights” or “religious repression,” leaders obscure the core truth: East Turkistan is an occupied country, and the Uyghurs are not a “minority group,” but a nation under siege. This framing benefits Beijing by allowing it to invoke sovereignty and non-interference to shield itself from accountability. In reality, China is misusing the language of sovereignty to justify colonization. This distortion of international norms must be challenged.

Addressing the Uyghur genocide requires a shift in global thinking. First, East Turkistan must be recognized as an occupied country, with its people's right to external self-determination affirmed under international law. The *UN Charter*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, and other legal instruments affirm the right of all peoples to determine their political status. Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples have never chosen to be part of China; their subjugation has been enforced through military occupation, demographic engineering, systemic repression, and a campaign of cultural and national erasure—not integration or coexistence, but elimination.

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Second, the genocide must be understood as part of a broader colonial project, not merely an episode of repression. This includes recognizing mass enslavement, demographic engineering, and physical and cultural erasure as fundamental tools of colonial domination. Efforts to address these violations must be paired with political actions to end China's illegal occupation of East Turkistan.

Third, the voices of East Turkistani institutions and leaders in exile must be included in international discussions about the future of the nation. The East Turkistan Government in Exile, along with rights groups and diaspora communities, have been calling for recognition, justice, and decolonization for decades. Their perspectives are essential to any serious solution.

Finally, international legal mechanisms must be pursued with urgency. This includes supporting East Turkistan's case at the International Criminal Court and filing additional cases at the International Court of Justice, sanctioning Chinese officials and entities involved in the genocide, and supporting investigations under universal jurisdiction laws in national courts.

The failure of the international community to stop the genocide in East Turkistan is not merely a failure of will—it is a failure of principle. So long as governments, media, and international institutions continue to treat this as an “internal issue” for China, the genocide will continue. Only by reframing this as a crisis of occupation, colonization, and national survival can the path to justice become clear.

About the author:

Salih Hudayar is a Uyghur American based in Washington, DC, serving as the Foreign Minister of the East Turkistan Government in Exile. He is also the leader of the East Turkistan National Movement and has been a prominent voice for the rights and self-determination of the East Turkistani people.