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Research Article | Araştırma Makalesi

ASSIMILATION POLICIES IN EAST TURKESTAN: URUMQI MASSACRE, CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

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Abstract

Why did East Turkestan, one of the homelands of the Turks, become a center of attraction and influence of great powers such as Britain, Russia and China between the 18th and 21st centuries, and why did it struggle for independence and existence while being exposed to which developments?, according to this kind of questions in this article, the massacres, ethnic cleansing attempts and genocide efforts against Uyghur Turks, especially after 2000, will be examined. In addition, this study, which will explain the legal violations against the Muslim Turks of East Turkestan, the separatist thoughts that started to gain momentum with the 2009 Urumqi Massacre, and the oppression and persecution process that spread over a wide area with the assimilation policies of the Chinese state between 2014-2025, will mention the concentration camps, which are not emphasized much, what kind of measures have been taken or should be taken by the international community, and the status of displaced persons as a result of forced migration. In the last part of the study, the justifications of China's game over East Turkestan, which countries recognize the massacres of Uyghur Turks as genocide and on what grounds, and which countries accept Uyghurs who seek refuge in third countries as refugees are among the topics to be explained.

Keywords: East Turkestan, China, Assimilation, Urumqi Massacre, Forced Migration

DOĞU TÜRKİSTAN'DA ASİMİLASYON POLİTİKALARI: URUMÇİ KATLİAMI, TOPLAMA KAMPLARI VE ÜLKE İÇİNDE YERİNDEN EDİLME

Öz

Türklerin anayurtlarından birisi olan Doğu Türkistan, neden 18. ve 21. yüzyıllar arasında İngiltere, Rusya ve Çin gibi büyük güçlerin cazibe merkezi oldu, etkisi altına girdi ve hangi gelişmelere maruz kalırken bağımsızlık ve varoluş mücadelesi verdi? gibi soruların cevaplarının aranacağı bu makalede, özellikle 2000 yılından sonra Uygurlu Türklere karşı gerçekleşen katliamlar, etnik temizlik girişimleri ve soykırım çabaları incelenecektir. Ayrıca, Doğu Türkistanlı Müslüman Türklere yönelik hukuksal ihlallerin, 2009 Urumçi Katliamı ile hız kazanmaya başlayan ayrılıkçı düşüncelerin ve 2014-2025 yılları arasında Çin devletinin asimilasyon politikalarıyla geniş bir alana yayılan baskı ve zulüm sürecinin anlatılacağı bu çalışmada, çok fazla vurgulanmayan toplama kamplarından, uluslararası toplum tarafından ne tür önlemlerin alındığı ya da alınması gerektiğinden ve zorla göç ettirme neticesinde yerinden edilmiş kişilerin statüsünden bahsedilecektir. Çalışmanın son kısımlarına gelindiğinde ise, Çin'in Doğu Türkistan üzerinden kurguladığı oyunun gerekçeleri, Uygur Türklerine yapılan katliamların hangi ülkeler tarafından ne tür nedenlerle soykırım olarak tanındığı ve üçüncü ülkelere sığınan Uygurların hangi ülkeler tarafından mülteci olarak kabul edildiği anlatılacak konular arasındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Doğu Türkistan, Çin, Asimilasyon, Urumçi Katliamı, Zorunlu Göç

Highlights | Öne Çıkanlar

- It includes inquiries into the political history and geopolitics of East Turkestan.
- It examines the massacres, ethnic cleansing attempts, and genocidal efforts against Uyghur Turks after 2000.
- It reveals the reasons behind China's machinations in East Turkestan.

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INTRODUCTION

The Uyghur Turks, one of the rare communities that remained unchanged in Central Asia, the homeland of the Turks for thousands of years, ruled in the territory of East Turkistan¹ (for relevant maps, see Mei, 2000: 76-82), maintained their language, religion, culture and traditional habits despite China's assimilation policies, and this struggle for existence has become even more pronounced since the mid-18th century (Thornton and Schurr, 2004: 94-95; Turdush, 2022: 11-14). The main reason for this situation is that both China and other imperialist powers want to rule alone in this geography, dominate the historical trade route known as the Silk Road and economically rule the world (Romgard, 2008: 35) (New Silk Road Project: Miller, 2017: 75-76; Boute, 2019: 3). Today, East Turkestan, which is one of the main centers of reserves and production of valuable minerals such as coal, oil, uranium, gold, copper, etc. (Yıldırım, 2013: 130; Fricke, 2014: 20-22), was once the struggle area of countries such as Britain-Russia-China, known as the 'great game' (Hopkirk, 2006: 222, 658), while in the 21st century it has become the struggle area of the USA, Russia and China in the context of the 'new great game'. Of course, from China's point of view, the independence and separation of such a geostrategically important hinterland from China would pose a major threat (Escobar, 2020: 21-24, 39-40, 111, 127-130). Therefore, for years, China has been the planner of the systematic assimilation of East Turkestan through different methods.

In this perspective, there are some questions that remain to be answered: What were the reasons for the policies of ethnic cleansing and oppression against the Uyghurs of East Turkestan in the post-World Wars I and II, the Cold War and the Millennium Era?; why have the people of East Turkistan, who have repeatedly attempted independence despite China's invasion and occupation attempts, not given up this struggle?; does the assimilation policy implemented by Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against Muslim Turks since 1949 bear any similarities with the assimilation policies of today?; what is the number of Uyghur Turks who were forced to migrate to concentration camps in East Turkistan and how long have they been in these camps?;

are Muslim and Turkish nations or Christian countries the most vocal supporters of the rights of the persecuted Uyghurs in the region?; have East Turkestanis who have been internally displaced due to persecution and who have traveled outside the country to seek asylum and refugee status been granted such status or have they been returned to China by the countries they have arrived in?; what was the response to this atrocity against Muslim Turks in the international community and in the context of criminal law, and which countries recognized this situation?

It is known that Muslim Turks, who have fought and are ready to fight for their independence, have been trying to protect their culture, language and religion since China's occupation of the region in 1759, and that they are trying to make the discrimination they experience known to all the world states despite being subjected to various kinds of persecution in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China today (Buğra, 1952: 20-27). In particular, the massacres of Uyghur ethnic people living in Urumqi by Chinese forces and civilian guerrillas in 2009 led to an inevitably negative turn of events, and the "guilty" group portrayed by China was the Uyghur Turks (Zhang and McGhee, 2014: 2, 42-46, 101, 149).

In addition, the 'attempt to assimilate and encircle Muslim Turks', which has been one of the unchanging policies since the Mao Zedong era, began to gain intensity day by day, the door to large-scale conflicts that could not be ended was opened, and despite all this, Mao Zedong's book and official Chinese sources never used the term 'East Turkestan', this ethnographic part was called 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region', and it was mentioned that the region joined China through peaceful policies (Zedong, 1998: 99, 251, 347). This situation was examined under the title of 'Measures that can be taken in the region in response to the increase in the cultural, commercial, economic and geopolitical importance of East Turkestan', which was among the projects announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping on November 19, 2013, and the possible independence initiatives of East Turkestan and the possibility of pursuing a separate domestic and foreign policy from China were tried to be prevented, and possible criticisms against China on this issue were tried to be covered up by claiming the danger of terrorism in the region (UBC, 2013; Jingjie, 2014; Blanchette, 2020). The real justification for all this was China's ideas of opening up to the world with the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", known as the 'New Silk Road', and the idea of

¹ *East Turkestan*: Known as Xinjiang (Xinjiang) Uyghur Autonomous Region or simply Xinjiang in official Chinese sources, this is the territory of Western China that China never wants to hear about, but which is also strongly emphasized by the Turks (Clarke, 2022: 52-54). For this reason, this study will mostly use the term 'East Turkestan'.

overcoming and, if necessary, eliminating any obstacles in this perspective (Chong and Pham, 2020: 96, 104, 109).

Thus, the reasons and consequences of the Chinese assimilation policies that have been, are being and will be experienced in connection with all these events and phenomena also raise some questions; China's population and influence in East Turkestan, which gained momentum after 1949 and has reached its peak today, has led to the idea that people of which ethnic origin should be settled in the region; and what kind of demographic change has been experienced in East Turkestan since 1953?

When evaluated in this context, the persecution and torture of Uyghur Turks, Kazakhs and many Muslim Turks living in East Turkestan after 2014 became visible in the concentration camps established by China, this ethnic cleansing, which intensified between 2014-2016, continued in 2025, and an environment in which the camps were actively used and escape was difficult (Turdush, 2022: 44, 49, 54-56, 63, 72, 86). These concentration camps, referred to by China as 'education, rehabilitation and vocational centers', but in fact aimed at assimilating Uyghur Turks, aimed to alienate people from their religious values, their mother tongue and all kinds of Turkish culture, and became a temple of shame where Muslim Turks were forcibly displaced and tortured for years (Rodríguez-Merino, 2022: 126-127, 134, 147-150).

1. East Turkistan's Struggle for Independence and Existence

As it is known, the Turkish nation, which has existed for three thousand years, formed a migration corridor extending first from East Asia to Central Asia, then to Anatolia and the Balkans, and reached the territory of East Turkistan ("Uyghuristan") with the Asian Hun Empire between the 1-3rd centuries BC (Barthold, 2018: 117), and a continuous and endless conflict environment against China was formed (Samolin, 1964: 23-26). These conflicts, which started with Teoman and Mete Khan in the pre-bellum period, continued with the First Turkic (Gokturk) Khaganate between the 6th-8th centuries A.D., and continued until the Uighur State, which continued its existence under the leadership of Kutlug I Bilge Kagan in the 8th-9th centuries A.D., lost its effectiveness (Kitapçı, 2004: 154-158). It should also be noted that with the Battle of Talas in 751 A.D., the Abbasids defeated the Chinese and increased their sphere of influence, the Muslim faith developed and spread in both East Turkestan (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, now

part of China) and West Turkestan (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and most of Tajikistan) (Samolin, 1964: 66-67).

Although the East Turkestanis remained ungoverned for a certain period, they achieved peace, tranquility and prosperity in cities such as Kashgar, Khotan, Karashar and Hami under the sovereignty of the Qarakhanid State between the 9th-13th centuries, and began to rise with the East Chagatai (Mongolia) Khanate in the 16th century (Beller-Hann, 2008: 303-316). The Islamic world, which was left without a protector after the Ottoman Empire entered periods of stagnation and decline, began to be sacrificed to the imperialist aims of countries such as Britain, Russia and China, especially in Central Asian geopolitics, and in this context, the East Turkestan region was occupied by the Chinese Manchu Empire in 1759 (Chaudhuri, 2017: 58-60).

The Turks, who were fond of their freedom and even risked extinction to establish an independent state, engaged in rebellion movements between 1759-1867, achieved their goals as a result of nearly 42 rebellion attempts, and took East Turkestan under the leadership of Yakub Beg, the leader of the Kashgar Khanate (Yao and Wriht, 2021: 107, 217). The Ottoman Empire also played a major role in this success, even if it had lost its former power, Sultan Abdulaziz who responded to Yakub Khan's call for help, provided arms and money to East Turkestan via India between 1872-1877, and military successes were achieved against the Chinese (Clarke, 2011: 26). In addition to appealing to the Ottomans for help, Yakub Khan also demanded that the Kashgar Khanate under his command be annexed to the Ottoman Empire (Clarke, 2011: 102-104). This request, which was welcomed by the Sultan, ensured the continuous flow of Ottoman aid to the region, and East Turkestan became a Turkish homeland again, as it had been centuries ago. Despite all these positive developments, China's aggressive policies towards the region became inexhaustible, and as a result, Yakub Khan lost his life in May 1877 as a result of a defeat (it should also be noted that the Ottoman-Russian War started in April 1877, which delayed aid to East Turkestan) (Starr, 2004: 102-104).

Until the fall of the Chinese Manchu Empire in 1911, there was no serious movement in East Turkestan, and this situation continued until the 1930s. In the 1930s, the Muslim Turks in the region who again achieved military successes against China, established the Islamic Republic of East Turkestan, which was to rule between November 2, 1932 and February 6, 1934 (Dillon, 2014: 30-43), but

this state's life was short-lived due to the lack of sufficient military support and financial aid from the Turkish Islamic world (Ke, 2018: 28, 33, 40). When the collapse of the aforementioned Turkish state is evaluated in the context of the 'great game', it becomes clear that the desires and wishes of the imperialist powers for the region are decisive. This state structure, led by Khoja Niyaz, one of the leading figures in the resistance of Uyghur Turks, began to inspire other states and leaders in Central Asia, and the Soviet Union, which was aware of the impending danger and ruled Central Asia, allied with China and brought the Islamic Republic of East Turkestan to an end (Hasanli, 2021: 18-28).

However, it should be known that despite all kinds of threats and pressure from imperialist powers such as China and Russia, Uyghur Turks have not given up their goals and ideals, and have made every effort to establish an independent state. Soviet Russia, which supported China for its own interests at the time, supported the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic in 1944, and when China, which was struggling with Japan during World War II, could not send auxiliary troops to the region that the Uyghur Turks led by Alihan Töre managed to take the region through the Cossack forces of the USSR (Finley and Zang, 2015: 34-35). When World War II ended and the world was divided between the US and the USSR and the People's Republic of China was established in China territory in 1949 under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the days of persecution for both Turks and other minorities returned (Meisner, 2007: 193-198). Because those who came to power in China had Communist views and were ready to establish good relations with Russia. And so, it is known that in 1949, Chinese leader Mao Zedong held talks with Soviet leader Josef Stalin in Moscow about East Turkestan and made every effort to transfer Russian weapons and equipment in the region to the Chinese army (for Stalin's official statement on this issue, see Ke, 2018: 201-202). In addition, the People's Republic of China annexed the region in December 1949, the East Turkistan Republic collapsed, and the second major attempt of the Turks to gain independence came to an end in the second half of the 20th century.

By the 1950s, Communist China's first activities in East Turkestan included ideas such as reducing the Uyghur population in the region, eradicating monotheistic beliefs such as Islam, which is the existential opposite of Communism, and assimilating Uyghur Turkism, which is a reflection of Turkophobia dating back to Mete Khan (O'Brien and Brown, 2022: 2-5, 63, 109). The Chinese Communist Party, which was

protested with street demonstrations between 1947 and 1953, intervened harshly in the protests, nearly a thousand Turks lost their lives and hundreds of thousands had to seek refuge in other countries (Jacobs, 2016: 245-247; Benson, 1990: 126-129). In the last part of the article, we will talk about where these people took refuge.

In addition to the massacres in 1953, China's ethnic cleansing attempts in East Turkestan continued in 1959 and 1969. According to the 1953 census, the Uyghur Turkic population in the region was around 75% (3.650 thousand), while the Han Chinese population was only 6% (300 thousand), the remaining 500 thousand people were Kazakhs and 70 thousand people were Kyrgyz (Hayes and Clarke, 2015: 33, 36, 61). China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, sought ways to increase the number of Han Chinese in the region and continued its incentive policies by giving property such as houses, land, fields, etc. and jobs to the Chinese who would settle in East Turkestan (Millward, 2021: 381). In the 1980s and 1990s, there were partial massacres against Muslim Turks, and Uyghur Turks, who were subjected to an increasingly intense assimilation policy, either lost their lives by facing hunger and misery or had to seek refuge in other countries (Warikoo, 2016: 70-72; Fuller and Star, 2004: 19). Therefore, by the 2000s, the demographic picture in 1953 had changed significantly, with the population of Uyghur Turks dropping to 45% and the population of Han Chinese increasing to 40% (Hayes and Clarke, 2015: 129-137).

2. East Turkistan and the Urumqi Massacre (2009) after 2001

With the turn of the millennium, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were targeted in countries such as Afghanistan, and East Turkistan, which is close to the region, was subjected to serious repression due to its Muslim identity. Especially in the days when the concepts of 'Islam and terrorism' were juxtaposed in the Western world and all Muslims were under condemnation, the People's Republic of China did not want to miss this opportunity and tried to legitimize its oppressive policies in East Turkestan on grounds that were not considered remarkable (Tobin, 2020: 101, 106-107). As these repressive policies increased, the foundations of the Urumqi massacre in 2009 were laid, and China's assimilation policy was included in the field of practice after 2003 (Lonely Planet Travel Guide Chapter, 2016: 39). So what kind of implementation and infrastructure was there in China's oppression policies against Uyghur Turks?

To answer this question in a chronological line, it is necessary to first mention the Uyghur workers who were forcibly sent to China in 2003. East Turkestanis, who were sent to Chinese provinces such as Shandong and Guangdong for cheap labor, initially experienced a process in which women workers, and later workers of all age groups, were enslaved, and due to the mobbing (psychological violence and pressure) they were exposed to, they could not engage in any significant rebellion and protest activities in the factories where they worked until 2009 (Cappalletti, 2020: 96, 140, 150). It is also known that Muslim Turks were mostly employed in these 'slave labor' factories, that they sometimes did not receive their wages and that they could not fully claim their rights in Chinese territory because they were foreigners (Byler et al., 2022: 7, 165-171, 235, 248).

As it can be understood, when the rights of the Turks were closed, the oppression and persecution of the Chinese increased, and there was an increase in intimidation and harassment, especially against women workers (Amnesty International, 2023a). On a similar day, on June 26, 2009, a big fight broke out between East Turkistani male workers and Chinese workers in a toy factory in Guangdong's Shaoguan district due to allegations of harassment against Muslim Turkish female workers, and the Chinese, who called for reinforcements upon the escalation of the incidents, started to kill Uyghurs when they were outnumbered (Cappalletti, 2020: 150). The delay or unwillingness of the Chinese police, military and other law enforcement agencies to intervene in the incidents resulted in the deaths of nearly 300 of the 800 Uyghur workers, 400 of them fleeing and seeking refuge away from the region, and nearly 100 of them going missing (Zhang and McGhee, 2014: 2, 42-46, 101, 149). These murdered people of Turkish origin were subjected to various kinds of torture both before their deaths and after their deaths, their bodies were subjected to certain cruelties.

No matter what was done, this incident, which China tried to conceal, could not be prevented from being heard in East Turkestan, and the Uyghurs who took to the streets to protest the massacre faced Chinese soldiers, police and security disguised in civilian clothes, and clashes spread throughout East Turkestan. In short, people from all walks of life such as academics, lawyers, civil servants, farmers, workers, etc. participated in the protests that started on July 5, 2009, and tens of thousands of people were involved in the protests, which were attended by around two thousand demonstrators in the first days, as the conflict between Han Chinese and

Uyghurs grew, and in parallel, the scale of the massacre in Urumqi increased (Zhang and McGhee, 2014: 2, 42-46, 101, 149; Dillon, 2018: 24, 69, 240, 265). Moreover, if all these events are viewed objectively, the Uyghurs were not the only ones affected by this negative process, many Han Chinese were also killed and injured (Cliff, 2016: 181-182, 194-196).

According to Chinese sources, nearly 200 Uyghurs, Han Chinese and Hui citizens lost their lives in the incidents in Urumqi, while nearly 2000 others were seriously injured and struggled to survive. According to Uyghur sources in East Turkestan, many more Muslim Turks were killed (thousands) and wounded (Zhang and McGhee, 2014: 2, 48). In addition, thousands of Uyghurs disappeared in the chaos, the property of shopkeepers in Urumqi was burned and looted, and the Chinese law enforcement agencies exacerbated the events instead of calming them down (for relevant documents and pictures, see R.A., 2011: 23, 39-40, 56-57). To see all these protests as a series of ordinary events in an ordinary factory would be a reductionist view, and this would be to ignore both the Uyghur struggle for independence since the 19th century and the efforts of Muslim Turks who have been rightfully resisting persecution since 1949 (McMillen, 1979: 28-48).

Besides that, the reactions and sanctions of the international community against China's oppression and persecution in Urumqi have also increased, and organizations such as NATO, the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International wanted to intimidate China with their official statements (Amnesty International, 2023a), in this international order, which includes countries such as the USA, Russia, France, Japan, Türkiye, Switzerland, Kazakhstan, etc., most states had to keep their sanctions limited as they are economically dependent on China (Li, 2018: 191-192).

3. China's Systematic Eradication and Assimilation Policies

The Chinese, who have been trying to assimilate the Turks since the 300s BC, tried to carry out these assimilation policies through Chinese princesses after the death of the Asian Hun Emperor Mete Khan, and although they achieved partial success in this regard, they could not achieve their ambitions, and the Turkish language and culture continued during the Huns (Dillon, 2003: 10). Approaching the end of the 19th century, China, which could not establish a definite sovereignty in

the geography of East Turkestan, started to take the Uyghur Turks under its sovereignty after the 1877 invasion and named these lands Xinjiang (new region=new borders) in 1884. Since even the name given to the country was part of assimilation, Uyghur Turks have always used the name 'East Turkestan' (McMillen, 1979: 19; Byler et al., 2022: 12).

As mentioned in the previous sections, from the overthrow of the Chinese Manchu Empire in 1911 to the rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong in 1949, some Turkic Islamic States were established, many rebellion movements took place and the policies of Chineseization of the Turks continued unabated (Waley-Cohen, 1991: 1, 11, 34). The Uyghur Turks continued their just struggle for existence and rebellion movements against this oppression and persecution from 1949 to the 2000s, and China's systematic extermination and assimilation policy took place in all areas regardless of religion, language, culture and economic order (Guo, 2015: 126, 155).

One of the first assimilation policies implemented by China in order to destroy the Uyghurs was to destroy the Turkish language, culture and names, and China disregarded the rules of law in order to control East Turkestan, which is autonomous in its internal affairs, and with a law enacted in 2003, it switched to a bilingual education system in all of East Turkestan. For this reason, thousands of Turkish teachers of Uyghur origin, whose Chinese language skills were not sufficient, became unemployed in one day, and when no solution method could be produced to this problem, students were left behind in their education, and they started to be educated by Chinese teachers who did not speak Turkish in a way that lacked their culture. These problems have been faced despite the fact that Article 12 of the Chinese Constitution guarantees that minorities will not be victimized in terms of education in their own language (Holdstock, 2015: 212-221). As a result, this geography, known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, has been subjected to the oppression of the Chinese Communist Party and has not been able to exercise its powers, despite having the right to self-sustainability and the authority to make independent decisions in its internal affairs (Finley and Zang, 2015: 75, 105, 110, 194).

The most important thing to know is that according to Article 116 of the Chinese Constitution, 'the rights to be obtained by the regions within the borders of Chinese sovereignty that have a certain autonomy are determined, and these autonomous regions, which have many political and economic privileges, cannot exercise these rights due to another statement in the same

article. This statement is; "without the authorization of the National People's Congress, China's legislature and the highest level state institution, the decisions of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on 'autonomous region and local autonomous region regulations' will have no legal basis and will be annulled" (The State Council: People's Republic of China, Section 6, Article 116, 2009). Thus, despite receiving the necessary public support, China revoked many administrative decisions in East Turkestan, sent all activists who objected to this situation and engaged in rebellion movements to detention centers, and suppressed the subsequent events in a bloody way. In 2004, China continued to apply different types of assimilation, this time economic, cultural, racial and religious assimilation methods, and risked all kinds of ethnic cleansing and genocide methods to eradicate the Uyghur Turks and the Islamic religion from Chinese territory (Bovingdon, 2004: 25).

In addition to all these discriminatory practices, after 2004, Uyghur workers who are mostly women were taken to factories in Shandong and Guangdong provinces of China for cheap labor, often had to work like slaves in these factories without getting paid and became a part of economic assimilation (Cappalletti, 2020: 96, 140). In addition, these Muslim Turkic women were handed over to human traffickers in the Chinese provinces where they were forcibly displaced and placed at the center of policies planned to exterminate the Uyghur Turks. The systematic eradication policies that existed in the post-2015 period, such as the process of detaining Turkish women if they gave birth to more than one child, the continuous oppression and persecution through birth control methods, came to the fore as extensions of the assimilation policies that started in this period (Grose, 2020: 22).

As a result, different methods of destroying Turkish Muslim culture have emerged for the Chinese, and since 2005, Turkish Islamic architecture in East Turkestan has been ignored, and with the construction of Chinese-style buildings and temples, many historical mosques, madrasas, kulliye, tombs, caravanserais, inns, baths and imaret belonging to Uyghurs have been demolished, and many traces of history have been erased with concrete evidence (Byler et al., 2022: 8, 131, 135). It is estimated that more than 10,000 mosques in East Turkestan were destroyed by China, especially between 2016 and 2025. In response to China, which faced the reactions of international public opinion, denied these allegations and stated that the mosques were under restoration, French state television shared satellite images in 2018, proving that the mosques were not under restoration,

but were completely demolished and destroyed (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2019; UNHCR, 2022: 20, 28). As it can be understood, China, which continues its assimilation policies in every sense, has started to carry out its oppression and persecution through human bodies this time, disregarding human rights and freedoms, has established concentration camps in East Turkestan and forcibly sent Muslim Uyghur Turks to these camps (Hasanli, 2021: 146, 199).

4. Concentration Camps in East Turkestan and Internal Displacement

The Chinese Communist Party, which continued its discriminatory and violent policies against Uyghur Turks after the massacre in the capital Urumqi on July 5, 2009, did not make an agreement that would ensure social peace, and intensified ethnic cleansing and genocide practices after 2014, was held responsible for the massacre and displacement of millions of people, and Chinese politicians had a major share in this situation (Sarikaya and Kocatepe, 2023: 300-301). In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping, who visited East Turkestan, saw that China had not been able to assimilate this region for 64 years, that despite all efforts, Muslim Uyghur Turks had not lost anything in terms of their religion, language and culture, and on his return to Beijing on November 19, 2013, he established examples of implementation under the name of emergency action plans (UBC, 2013; Jingjie, 2014; Blanchette, 2020).

In 2014, the "Pair Up and Become Family Project" was put into effect in the first place, in this context, Han Chinese were placed in the homes of Uyghur Turkish families, and these Han Chinese, who worked like intelligence agents, reported to Beijing on issues such as the religious beliefs of Muslim families, the language they spoke, how they raised their children, whether they assimilated Chinese culture and the Communist party, and Muslim Turks with 'objectionable' behaviors and thoughts were identified and sent to concentration camps (Foreign Policy, 2018; Goff, 2019). These concentration camps, which the Chinese State denied at first, but which China was forced to admit as a result of the Uyghur Turks' interviews with international media organs, were called 'education, vocational, labor or rehabilitation camps' by the CCP, and although the camps were established between 2014-2016, they reached a record high in terms of occupancy rate in 2016-2018, and even old hospitals, schools and state buildings were transformed into forced migration and genocide camps (Rodríguez-Merino, 2022: 126-127, 134, 147-150).

Moreover, as the number of internally displaced Turks increased, the number of camps also increased, with satellite images showing that the camps have grown almost ten times larger (UNHCR, 2022: 20, 28). While this was happening on the one hand, on the other hand, negativities awaited Uyghurs who were unable to leave their homes, and the number of Chinese political agents placed in their homes increased day by day, reaching 200 people in 2014, 200,000 in 2016, and 1 million between 2018 and 2025 (Foreign Policy, 2018a; Goff, 2019).

According to a statement made by an Australian political research center in 2020, it was determined that there are more than 380 concentration camps in East Turkestan, and although the number is constantly changing, it is known that the camp in Urumqi, which has a capacity of 130 thousand people, is the largest camp where Uyghur citizens stay, and that no one is allowed to enter and exit the camps except the authorities in these places where oppression and persecution do not end (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020; Amnesty International, 2024). Surrounded by high walls and wire fences, these camps were called 'vocational training centers' by the Chinese administration (Rodríguez-Merino, 2022: 126-127, 134, 147-150), which brings to mind the following question; what kind of training center is there that is protected by walls like a prison, where the person who enters cannot leave, and even if he leaves, either the dead or the devastated and exhausted living person comes out?

Muslim Turks, who were suddenly taken from their homes and forcibly sent to these genocide camps without any crime, said that the Chinese administration targeted them with unjust and unlawful accusations and imprisoned them in these camps. In short, the majority of these people faced incriminating statements because of their religious beliefs, some because they prayed and fasted, some because they kept a Koran in their homes and provided religious education, and some because they did not drink alcohol or eat pork, and they were forcibly relocated and sent to these concentration camps and forced to do all these things they did not want to do (Genocide Watch, 2019). In addition, Han Chinese, who were brought to this geography with the promises of houses, land, jobs and marriage in order to strengthen demographically in East Turkestan, were also encouraged to marry Uyghur girls, and the refusal of Uyghur girls who did not want to marry a member of a nation that tried to assimilate them faced the sanctions of the Chinese state, and this situation sometimes resulted in them and sometimes their family members being sent to

concentration camps, which are open prisons (BBC, 2022).

As can be seen from witness statements and the work of international organizations and NGOs, the developments in the camps reveal the extent of violence. In these genocide camps, Uyghur Turks are forced to 'wake up early in the morning, recite the Chinese national anthem and say that they love Chinese President Xi Jinping'. They are also made to swear from the first day they enter the camp that they will never speak about Turkishness and Islam again and that they will make every effort to learn the Chinese language and culture. Those who do not fulfill these conditions, which are imposed by China's repressive policies, are thrown into solitary confinement, tortured and starved for days (The Guardian, 2019; Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Similar to the Nazi camps where the Germans massacred their Jewish citizens during World War II, these places where nearly 3 million Uyghurs were housed, turned into a genocide center where women were oppressed with birth control methods and nearly 500 thousand children were taken away from their families and taken to different camps (Foreign Policy, 2018b). Despite all these events, China denies its actions and states that the allegations of ethnic genocide are unfounded (Amnesty International, 2023b).

Muslim Turks of Kazakh and Kyrgyz origin living in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are also known to be among the people working as correctional officers in the camps. These officers, who sometimes did not remain silent about the persecution, either escaped from the camps and sought refuge in Kazakhstan or were detained and imprisoned in the camps (France 24, 2018). Thousands of Kazakh families who applied to 'Atayurt', a non-governmental organization operating in Kazakhstan, made great efforts to rescue nearly 2 thousand Muslims of Kazakh origin among the nearly 3 million people in the camps in East Turkestan, and a certain number of these people were allowed to cross into Kazakhstan after the Kazakh Foreign Ministry contacted China (UNHCR, 2023; Anadolu Agency, 2019).

Under China's so-called 'anti-extremism' laws, people who disrupt public order, engage in terrorism and hold marginalized views are punished and sent to concentration camps. Research has shown that people of Uyghur origin have been sent to these camps and subjected to various kinds of torture simply because they are Turks or because they fulfill their religious obligations (NPR, 2018). In addition, organizations such as the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination held meetings with other NGOs in

Geneva, Switzerland in 2022 and reported that the rulers in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region had used the powers of the local People's Congress to make unlawful decisions and were responsible for the internal displacement, forced migration to concentration camps and detention of Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz citizens who were labeled as 'political criminals' without any evidence (United Nations, 2022a). NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also stated that China is 'systematically engaged in extermination and human rights violations and that the scale of the massacre will grow if necessary measures are not taken' (Amnesty International, 2021; Anadolu Agency, 2019).

4.1. Legal Consequences of the Events in East Turkistan: Recognition as "Genocide" and International Sanctions

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was signed by the United Nations Security Council in 1948 and entered into force in 1951, and has so far been ratified by nearly 140 countries, was announced to the whole world as a result of the efforts of Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew whose family and relatives were mostly killed by the Nazis (Martin, 1984: 170-171, 309-312): "The crime of genocide consists of certain crimes committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, such as killing a member of a particular community, inflicting physical or mental harm on him/her, forcing him/her to live in conditions that will destroy his/her life, preventing births within the community, and transferring children within the community to another group" (Cooper, 2008: 2, 8, 72-73; United Nations, 1951: 1; Finley and Zang, 2015: 13-14).

As a result of their meetings, the national parliaments of the United States and Canada also determined that many of the above-mentioned genocide articles were applied by the Chinese state against Uyghur Muslim Turks, accepted that China committed the crime of genocide in their parliaments, and then started to increase the economic and political sanctions they imposed against China (U.S. Department of State, 2021; Government of Canada, 2023a). Companies such as apple, samsung, nike and adidas have moved some of their factories from China to India, while other Western countries have moved their companies to Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, etc. (BBC, 2020). Apart from this, international measures and investigations have gained momentum (United Nations, 2022b), and in 2020, the UN Human Rights Council voted on a motion to investigate China's genocide and human rights violations against Uyghur Turks, and the motion

was voted in favor of the Chinese state with 19 rejections, 17 acceptances and 11 abstentions; in short, the persecution in East Turkestan was kept silent. The most interesting aspect of this vote was that most of the countries that voted 19 against and 11 abstained were Muslim and Turkish², while Uyghur Muslim Turks were seeking their rights (International Federation For Human Rights, 2022).

It should also be noted that some countries had remained silent against China's unlawful actions years ago. Some states, such as Cambodia, returned nearly 20 East Turkestan nationals to China in 2009, regardless of whether they had been granted refugee status, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement (Article 33/1) of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2009). Cambodia sided with China when Uighur asylum seekers were unjustly extradited, and as a result, China signed 14 different commercial and military agreements worth 850 million dollars with Cambodia (Reuters, 2009).

4.2. Forced Migration of Uyghurs from East Turkistan to Other Countries: Asylum Seeker and Refugee Movements

Since the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, people of Muslim Turkish origin have started to be targeted primarily, the 2009 Urumqi Massacre and the genocide in Uyghur concentration camps between 2016 and 2025 were similarly experienced in 1953, and as examined under the title of 'East Turkistan's struggle for independence' in the first part of the article, after some massacres, there was an influx of refugees to Muslim and Turkish origin countries such as Türkiye (Wang, 2003: 45-47, 53). These Uyghur forced migrants initially sought refuge in border countries such as India and Pakistan, and nearly 900 of them were brought to Türkiye with the efforts of non-governmental organizations such as the Red Crescent. Thousands of Uyghur Turks have defected to Anatolia over the years, and Türkiye has made every effort to ensure their integration and well-being (Millward et al., 2010: 258, 260-261, 265; Beydulla, 2019: 181).

Today, countries such as Canada and the United States have done similar practices, especially since 2006, they have invited East Turkestanis who have been

persecuted and forced to seek refuge and asylum in third countries (human rights activists such as Rebiya Kadeer³, etc., BBC, 2009) to their countries, and they have also initiated legal studies on this issue (Hillman and Tuttle: 2016: 16). For example, this law, which was submitted to the Canadian parliament in 2022 as the M-62 bill and passed in February 2023 with the full vote of 322 MPs in the parliament, included Uyghur Turks seeking asylum, defection or refugee status in third countries and stated that approximately 10 thousand people would be admitted to the country. Every effort was made to complete this process, which was carried out by the Canadian immigration ministry, within a year, and the Canadian government signed a decision that will set an example for other countries and stated that such policies will continue (Parliament of Canada, 2022; Government of Canada, 2023b; Uyghur Times, 2024). As a result, while many Muslim or Turkish-origin countries remain silent on the persecution of Uyghurs, the fact that Canada, which is predominantly Christian, has taken this decision has shown that some decisions can be taken without ethnic and religious discrimination and concern.

CONCLUSION

Although Chinese rulers claim that 'East Turkestan has belonged to them for centuries', as explained in the first part of this article, it was not possible to talk about Chinese hegemony in these lands until the 18th century, the first occupations started after the 1750s, and the process of China's patronage of the region accelerated after 1949 (Betts et al., 2019: 126-127, 135). This desire for sovereignty, which began with Mao Zedong, opened the door to one of the greatest evils to be done to the Uyghurs, with the first nuclear facility established in 1959 in the Lop Nur region of East Turkestan, 46 nuclear tests were conducted between 1964 and 1996, and it was determined that nearly one million Uyghurs were affected by this situation, and the number of deaths, injuries, disabilities and cancer cases increased (Scientific American, 2009). This information shows that the Uyghur community has created a 'threat perception' for the CCP, and in China, which has more than 55 ethnic groups, 'diversity' has come to mean 'a security threat that must be eliminated'.

² Some Muslim or Turkic countries that voted against: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Senegal, Sudan, UAE, Qatar... Countries of Muslim or Turkish origin that abstained from voting: Libya, Malaysia, Gambia, Benin (International Federation for Human Rights, 2022).

³ Rebiya Kadeer has fought hard to defend the rights of East Turkistanis and was elected president of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) in 2006 (World Uyghur Congress, 2010).

In addition, economic reasons have also enabled East Turkestan geopolitics to come to the forefront as an important actor role model, this region, which has fertile lands, has been the center of attraction for imperialist powers in the context of agriculture, animal husbandry, underground wealth and industrial products, and the fact that nearly 85% of China's gold, coal and steel mines have been in this geography since ancient times, and that 40% of the Chinese state's coal needs and 20% of its oil and natural gas needs are provided from the East Turkestan hinterland is proof of this situation (Yıldırım, 2013: 130; Fricke, 2014: 20-22). This systematic process has been shaped on the basis of reducing the Uyghur population in the region and increasing the Han Chinese population, the idea of completely eliminating the Uyghur population in the region by 2050 was a necessity in the context of China's 'New Silk Road Project', which China planned to pass through more than 60 countries, and economic concerns paved the way for China's genocide of Muslim Turks (The Diplomat, 2015; Romgard, 2008, 88-91).

So what is the main issue that needs to be emphasized and resolved with all these developments? When asked a question like that, the best answer that can be given is that these people, who have been subjected to Chinese assimilation, who have been forcibly sent to concentration camps because of their Islamic faith and Turkish race, and who are 'internally displaced persons', should be removed from these camps as soon as possible and all camps should be closed by the Chinese administration. When we look at the reality, in the context of East Turkestan policies, after 2016, the Chinese state intensified its oppression and persecution and increased the number and area of camps secretly from everyone. The opposite situation also occurred in similar periods, and after the parliaments of countries such as the United States and Canada recognized that 'genocide was committed by China against Uyghurs' and announced this to the whole world, sanctions of large companies against China became visible, so that the Chinese government was forced to release some Uyghur citizens in East Turkistan camps (BBC, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2021; Government of Canada, 2023a).

Consequently, some countries, organizations, institutions and NGOs that do not want to disrupt their economic relations with China, have political interests with Russia and therefore try to form a political and military union with the CCP, which is one of its most important allies, have not spoken out against the persecution in East Turkestan, even if they are of Muslim

or Turkish origin, and have remained in the Russian-Chinese grip (Kara, 2021: 24). In the world, apart from Türkiye, the United States, Canada, etc., there have not been many actors defending the rights of Uyghurs (the Uyghur diaspora has generally risen in these countries, Tyler, 2004: 222-246), internally displaced persons, asylum seekers or refugees, whether Syrian, Arakanese, Yemenite, Afghan or Uyghur, have shared a similar fate, while "Christian, white-skinned and blond Ukrainians" have received preferential treatment by Western countries (Gülerce and Bayram, 2023: 90).

In short, in this world where proxy wars come to the forefront and countries and people are only trying to maximize their own interests, two different views of two different thinkers shed light on the events: "Every effort is permissible for every means to an end" (Machiavelli, 2004.); 'Do not do to another what you do not wish to be done to you' (Confucius, Brainy Quotes, 2024).

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