

# Between Urumchi and Kazan: The Tatars in Chinese Concentration Camps

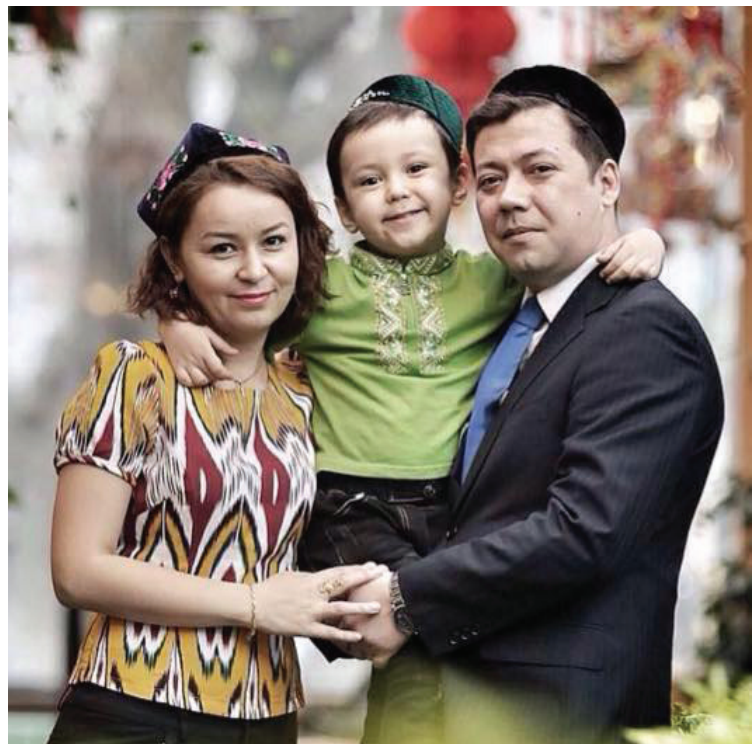
□ CAP Paper 219, June 2019

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In October 2018, in response to a question about Muslims in China asked during a meeting in Kazakhstan, Ravil' Gainutdin, the head of Russia's Council of Muftis, said that he had traveled to China and met Chinese Muslims on many occasions<sup>1</sup> and that according to the Union of Chinese Muslims, Muslims in China were not oppressed and did not feel discriminated against. A few days after Gainutdin's denial of massive oppression in Xinjiang, Kamil' Samigullin, the mufti of Tatarstan, declared on his social media account that he condemned China's anti-Islamic policies.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, it is unlikely that Gainutdin was unaware of what

was happening in China, because several pieces about the situation in Xinjiang had appeared in the Russian media. The majority of the media pieces in Russian were translations or adaptations from Western media outlets.<sup>3</sup> However, one of the liveliest descriptions of the dystopian surveillance system in Xinjiang, a piece from September 2018 entitled "An Internment Camp for 10 Million Uyghurs," was first published in Russian.<sup>4</sup> There were also a few cases of



*Marat Iskhakov with his wife, Sayyora, and his son, Ifat*

Xinjiang activism in Russia. On November 11, 2018, Russia's Uyghurs published a declaration about the situation in Xinjiang.<sup>5</sup> The piece briefly explained concentration camps and the technological surveillance regime in Xinjiang and informed the public that Russian Uyghurs were not able to communicate with their relatives in China and were denied visas. At the end of the text, the authors addressed the President of the Russian Federation and Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appealing to them to address these problems. On December 26, a group of Tatar activists organized a small rally to protest China's policies toward Uyghurs, Tatars, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz.<sup>6</sup> However, their request to hold the protest in front of the Chinese consulate was denied and they were directed to another place.

Indeed, what Gainutdin said was true until a few years ago for all Muslim groups in China except Uyghurs. Up until Chen Chuan-go's appointment as the Communist Party Secretary of XUAR, pressure in Xinjiang was almost completely on Uyghurs. Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tatars were more or less free to practice their religion, as were Chinese-speaking Muslims. When he was in Russia in 2007, Hu Jintao also visited Tatarstan and met Mintimer Shaimiev, then the President of Tatarstan.<sup>7</sup> Current president Rustam Minnikhanov visited Urumchi during his trip to China in 2014 and met Tatar groups there.<sup>8</sup> However, all this has changed dramatically in the last two or three years. In the 2000s, many Chinese citizens who were ethnic Tatars went to Tatarstan for education; Hu Jintao met

such Tatars in Kazan during his trip. Today, meanwhile, having received education in Tatarstan is one of the most common "reasons" for Tatars in Xinjiang to be sent to a concentration camp.

The only detailed report about Tatars' detention in Xinjiang was published by *Radio Free Europe's* Tatar Service on August 13, 2018.<sup>9</sup> It was emphasized that having Russian citizenship was difficult for Chinese Tatars and that many Tatars were therefore returning to China from Tatarstan. These Tatar families were not heard from again and Tatars in Australia reported that they were unable to communicate with their relatives in Xinjiang. One Australian Tatar heard that two of his relatives were in a concentration camp, but unfortunately the names of these two detainees were not provided. The Australian Tatar added that one of these relatives had studied in Japan and wondered if that was the reason for their detention. Everyone who had studied in Kazan deleted their social media accounts.

The report also briefly explained the new security system and surveillance regime in the region, based on the testimony of a Tatar who had visited Xinjiang the previous year. In fact, Russia is not unaware of new developments in surveillance technologies in Xinjiang. The Russian state and some Russian companies are impressed by the new developments in the Xinjiang "laboratory." Facial recognition technology is already being used in Russia, and the Vice President of Tatarstan announced that the regional government was in contact with Chi-

nese companies with a view to developing a new security model in Kazan.<sup>10</sup>

From the abovementioned *Azatlîq* piece, we understand that many Tatars are in concentration camps, yet the name of only one such individual is provided: Torsyntai Galiev. Galiev is an entrepreneur and one of the people who organized Chinese Tatars' education in Kazan. He has a few shops in the center of Urumchi and has been involved in trade with Russia and Turkey, among others. He also participated in meetings of the World Tatar Congress. Galiev was sentenced to 25 years in prison and is presumably imprisoned in Urumchi. The testifier claims that Galiev is imprisoned due to his travels to Turkey. Nevertheless, it is probable that being a leading figure in Tatar society and helping Tatar students go to Kazan, as well as his trade with Turkey and other countries, were all factors in his ultimate imprisonment.

However, Galiev is not the only Tatar detained in Xinjiang. The Xinjiang Victims Database lists five Tatar victims besides Galiev.<sup>11</sup> According to the 2000 Chinese census, the Tatar population in Xinjiang is 4,895. The fact that there are so many cases of detention among such a small minority demonstrates that Tatars are being targeted on a scale similar to Uyghurs and Kazakhs. Sabidulla Saipil, Abdigaim Kumar, Hamit Shyngys, and Marat Iskhakov were detained in concentration camps, while Shafkat Abas' family told Amnesty International that Abas is in a prison.<sup>12</sup> Abas studied traditional Uyghur medicine for five years at Xinji-

ang Uyghur Medical College in Hotan and had his own clinic. He was arrested on March 13, 2017, because he had accessed to foreign websites, possessed banned religious books, and contacted an elderly patient who was an imam. In May, his brother traveled to Urumchi from Australia to learn about Abas' arrest. He was told that he could not see his brother but that the police would inform him about the situation later. They never did.

Four out of five Tatars in the database were detained for reasons related to religion. Sabidulla Saipil (b. 1966) was detained in Changji on April 16, 2018, and sent to a concentration camp. His brother, who is a Kazakh citizen, testified for Sabidulla at Atajurt. According to his testimony, Sabidulla was detained because he had studied for three months

at a religious school in Turpan in 1985.<sup>13</sup> Another individual was detained for exactly the same reason: Sabidulla's cousin Erkin Vali (b. 1967) is in a camp because he studied at the same school. (Erkin's official nationality is not known; he is presumably half Tatar.)

Two of these five Tatars have been released from concentration camps after petitions to Atajurt. Most likely, both of them are now under house arrest. Abdigaim Kumar (b. 1982) studied at a madrasa in Tekes from 2000 to 2002 and became an imam.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, he worked as an official Chinese state imam in İli. In 2007, he studied for a while in Tatarstan. After Abdigaim's detention, his sister Munira Kumar, who is a Kazakh citizen, petitioned for him at Atajurt on several occasions. He was re-

leased from the camp on December 28, 2018. Abdigaim was not the only person for whom Munira testified. His 50-year-old cousin Hamit Shyngys was likewise sent to a concentration camp. Hamit was an ordinary farmer who had three children.<sup>15</sup> Performing *namaz* was enough to get him sent to a concentration camp. He was finally released from the camp on January 24 of this year.

The only one of the five who was not detained for reasons related to religion is Marat Iskhakov (b. 1982). We learn about Marat's detention from the List of Uyghur Intellectuals Imprisoned in China from 2016 to the Present, prepared by Abduweli Ayup.<sup>16</sup> According to the List, Marat used to work as a Chinese-language teacher at High School No. 14 in Urumchi. From one of Marat's social media accounts, I have also



*Munira Kumar petitions for her brother, Abdigaim Kumar, at Atajurt. Pictured next to her is Serikjan Bilash, the head of Atajurt, who is still under house arrest in Astana.*

learned that he studied communications engineering at Xinjiang University. I have talked to one of Marat's relatives (who would like to remain anonymous) and learned that Marat has an eight-year-old son whose name is Ilfat. His wife, who is an ethnic Uyghur, is currently free. From his social media account, it is easy to see how devoted Marat is to his family. Apparently, his command of English is very good; his relative also said that Marat had spent some time in Kazan in 2005 to study Russian. It is probable that the reason for his detention is his travels abroad

and contacts with foreigners. Marat is a person who follows developments in other parts of the world closely. After the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, he covered his profile photo with a French flag. In fact, the case of Marat very clearly proves how absurd are China's claims that detainees are extremists and radical Islamists who are being held for "re-education." Marat was a supporter of Real Madrid and a fan of Cristiano Ronaldo. He was listening to Michael Jackson, Adele, and Eminem. His colorful wedding photos show how full of life Marat was. Marat is

highly educated, so it is obvious that he does not need any "vocational training." Marat was a Chinese-language teacher, so it is evident that he does not need any Chinese language instruction. Evidently, therefore, Marat is a victim of China's policy of cultural genocide against Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities.

Marat belongs to a famous Tatar family. His grandfather Asgat Iskhakov (1921-1976) served in the national army of the Second East Turkestan Republic (1944-1949).<sup>17</sup> In 1950, Asgat joined the People's Republic of China's armed forces. He was killed in 1976 during the Cultural Revolution; his name would be rehabilitated posthumously. Asgat's brother, Margub Iskhakov (1923-1993), was a more famous soldier. He was one of the organizers of the East Turkestan Republic's national army and fought against the Kuomintang. In 1955, he was promoted to the rank of general in the Chinese army. Asgat migrated to the Soviet Union in 1960, dying in Almaty in 1993.

It is more than probable that there are many more Tatars in Chinese concentration camps. In her testimony, Munira Kumar also mentioned a certain Tursun (surname unknown).<sup>18</sup> Tursun's children were studying in Tatarstan, and he had moved there too. Yet during this process, he was called back to Xinjiang by Chinese authorities; upon his return, he was detained and sent to a concentration camp along with his wife and daughter. Munira claimed that from 2007 or 2008, around 30 Tatar students per year left Xinjiang to study in



*Marat Iskhakov with his wife, Sayyora. This photo may have been taken after their wedding.*

Tatarstan and that either these students or their parents are all now in concentration camps. When we consider the size of the Tatar population in Xinjiang, the number 30 is probably exaggerated. However, even if we cannot confirm Munira's claim, we know that one of the most common "reasons" for detention in Xinjiang is contact with the outside world: people who lived abroad, people who contacted foreigners, and particularly people who studied abroad are all targeted. This means that Munira's claim is likely to be broadly accurate. The Ministry of Education and Tatar universities should all investigate the fate of their students. Only then will we gain a better idea of the scale of oppression of Tatars in Xinjiang.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The article was first published in Turkish by Crimean News Agency—"Urumçi-Kazan hattı: toplama kamplarındaki Tatarlar," *QHA Media*, May 16, 2019, <https://qha.com.tr/haberler/urumci-kazan-hatti-toplama-kamplarindaki-tatarlar/33361/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Glava Soveta muftiev Rossii oproverg dannye o pritesnenii musul'man v Kitae," *RIA Novosti*, October 10, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20181010/1530365035.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ramazan Alpaut, "Muftii Tatarstana zastupilsia za musul'man Kitaia," *IdelReal*, October 13, 2018, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/29541990.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Viacheslav Polovinko, "Kitai-lager'," *Novaia gazeta*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/04/25/76311-kitay-lager>.

<sup>5</sup> "Kontslager' na 10 millionov uigurov," *Meduza*, Spetember 18, 2018, [https://meduza.io/feature/2018/09/18/kontslager-na-10-millionov-chelovek?utm\\_source=t.co&utm\\_medium=share\\_twitter&utm\\_campaign=share](https://meduza.io/feature/2018/09/18/kontslager-na-10-millionov-chelovek?utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=share_twitter&utm_campaign=share).

<sup>6</sup> Committee for Civil Rights, "Rossiiskie uigury pod prietselom kitaiskogo kontslageria," November 11, 2018, <http://zagr.org/1744.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Vadim Meshcheriakov, "Tatarskie aktivisty provedut v Kazani piket v zashchitu musul'man Kitaia," *IdelReal*, December 24, 2018, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/29673620.html>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://shaimiev.tatarstan.ru/eng/news/view/21312> (no longer available)

<sup>9</sup> Dandysh Kharrasova, "Minnekhanov Kytai seferen tatarlar belen ochrashudan bashlady," *Azatliq Radiosi*, April 15, 2014, <https://www.azatliq.org/a/25334393.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Kytaida 'akylga utyrtu' seiasete. Tatarlarga da kereshteler," *Azatliq Radiosi*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.azatliq.org/a/29426468.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ramazan Alpaut, "Kak Rossiia uchitsia u Kitaia sledit' za grazhdanami," *Nastoiashchee vremya*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/29626219.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database, <https://www.shahit.biz/eng/> (accessed June 26, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database, "Shafkat Abas," last modified June 16, 2019, <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=3423&fbclid=IwARoZMDn5dwo2HjvlSGgdfaJm5tZcwuZpa1GW36UTq4YuuB3fQ9aNw-g4Ab4>.

<sup>14</sup> "570," YouTube video, 4:23, uploaded by "Atajurt Kazakh Human Rights," December 8, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUooz\\_u2Xrs&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUooz_u2Xrs&feature=youtu.be) (accessed June 26, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database, "Abdigaim Kumar," last modified May 27, 2019, <https://www.shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=266>.

<sup>16</sup> Xinjiang Victims Database, "Hamit Shyngys," last modified May 27, 2019, <https://www.shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=267>.

<sup>17</sup> Abduweli Ayup, "List of Uyghur Intellectuals Imprisoned in China from 2016 to the Present," Xinjiang Victims Database, June 15, 2019, [https://shahit.biz/supp/list\\_003.pdf](https://shahit.biz/supp/list_003.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> "Iskhakovy," MillatTashlar Wiki, <http://www.millattashlar.ru/index.php/Исхаковы> (accessed June 26, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> "23.10.2018 жыл.СҰХБАТ-14," YouTube video, 10:10, uploaded by Atajurt Kazakh Human Rights, October 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dovq9H9ZmCo&feature=youtu.be> (accessed June 26, 2019).