



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by International Career Support Association, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 August 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## The Systemic Destruction of Uyghur Mosques and Culture in China

In a devastating blow to religious freedom and cultural heritage, the last major mosque in China to retain its traditional Arabic-style features has been stripped of its iconic domes and minarets. The Grand Mosque of Shadian, one of China's largest and most magnificent Islamic places of worship, has fallen victim to the government's relentless campaign to "sinicise" Muslim religious sites across the country.(\*1) The Chinese government is systemically eradicating Islamic identity in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (UAR), China, home to over 11 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. At the heart of this brutal crackdown is the widespread destruction and alteration of mosques - the spiritual and cultural centers of Uyghur communities. This assault on religious freedom is not just an attack on buildings, but a calculated attempt to erase an entire people's identity and way of life. Since 2016, under the euphemistically named Mosque Rectification Program, the Chinese Communist Party has embarked on a ruthless mission to demolish or fundamentally alter thousands of mosques.(\*2) The official justification of addressing unsafe construction is a thinly veiled lie, masking a sinister agenda to eliminate visible symbols of Islamic faith and Uyghur culture from the landscape.

The scale of this destruction is staggering and deeply disturbing. Radio Free Asia reported that up to 5,000 mosques were destroyed in just a three-month period in 2016.(\*3) A study by the Guardian and Bellingcat found that out of 100 religious sites surveyed, 31 mosques and two shrines had been damaged between 2016 and 2018, with 15 completely demolished. Agence France-Presse confirmed 30 mosques and religious sites had been razed, while six more had Islamic features forcibly removed. These numbers likely represent only a fraction of the total destruction, as many areas remain inaccessible to outside observers. This architectural erasure is not happening in isolation. It is part of a broader, horrifying campaign of repression that includes the mass detention of Uyghurs in a vast network of internment camps. The United Nations has stated that these actions may constitute crimes against humanity, an assessment that seems almost understated given the scale and brutality of China's actions.

The Chinese government's targeting of mosques is particularly insidious because it strikes at the heart of Uyghur spiritual and cultural life. By destroying these sacred spaces and detaining religious leaders, China aims to sever the connection between Uyghurs and their faith, forcibly assimilating them into the Party's vision of a homogeneous Chinese identity. This is nothing short of cultural genocide. Even historically significant structures have not been spared in this campaign of cultural vandalism. The complete demolition of the Kargilik Grand Mosque, built around 1540 CE, and the destruction of the historic gatehouse of the Keriya Id Kah Mosque, dating back to 1200 CE, are particularly egregious examples.(\*4) These acts erase centuries of Uyghur heritage and collective memory, leaving future generations disconnected from their history and cultural roots.

Satellite imagery and on-the-ground reports reveal the methodical and ruthless nature of China's campaign. Domes, minarets, crescent moons, and Arabic script - all distinctive elements of Islamic architecture - are Systemically removed. In a cruel twist, Chinese-style pagodas are often added in their place, a clear attempt to sinicize religious expression and erase any trace of Uyghur identity.

The few mosques permitted to remain standing have been transformed into tools of state propaganda and surveillance. This perversion of sacred spaces into instruments of state control is a particularly vicious form of repression. The Chinese government's assault on Islam extends far beyond the physical destruction of mosques. In a comprehensive effort to marginalize and control Islamic practice, authorities have banned religious education for minors, restricted fasting during Ramadan, and even prohibited Islamic clothing and grooming styles.(\*5) The message is clear that there is no place for Islamic faith or Uyghur identity in the Chinese state's vision of society.

The impacts of this repression are already visible and deeply concerning. Mosque attendance has plummeted as Muslims fear severe repercussions for practicing their faith. This climate of fear and intimidation is eroding the social fabric of Uyghur communities.

China's justification for these policies as necessary to combat extremism and terrorism is a blatant lie that the international community must forcefully reject. The indiscriminate nature of the crackdown reveals its true aim to forcibly assimilate Uyghurs and eradicate their distinct cultural and religious identity. This racist and xenophobic worldview is driving a campaign of cultural annihilation.

What's particularly alarming is that this campaign has now spread beyond Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (UAR), China. Recent reports indicate that mosques are being closed or altered in other regions with significant Muslim populations, including Ningxia, Gansu, and even Beijing.<sup>(\*6)</sup> This suggests a nationwide policy to restrict and control Islamic expression, raising fears that China's war on Islam could engulf millions more Muslims across the country. The transformation of the grand Doudian Mosque in Beijing is a stark example of this expanding crackdown.<sup>(\*7)</sup> Stripped of its domes, minarets, and most Islamic motifs, it now resembles the Great Hall of the People. This architectural assimilation is a visual representation of the Chinese state's attempt to subsume and erase minority identities.

Resistance to the demolitions by Uyghurs and other Muslims has been met with swift and brutal repression. In Yunnan province, hundreds of riot police violently put down protests against the removal of a mosque's dome.<sup>(\*8)</sup> Similar demonstrations in other regions have been quickly suppressed, with protesters facing arrest, detention, and likely torture. The courage of these protesters in the face of such overwhelming state power is both inspiring and heartbreaking. The destruction of mosques represents more than just the loss of buildings. For Uyghurs and other Chinese Muslims, it is an attack on their very existence and identity.

China's actions in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (UAR), China and beyond amount to cultural genocide - a systemic and deliberate attempt to erase the Uyghur people's connection to their faith, history, and identity. As the mosques of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (UAR), China and other Muslim regions are torn down or transformed beyond recognition, so too is the rich heritage of China's diverse religious landscape.

In its place, the Communist Party seeks to impose a monolithic vision of Chinese culture - one that leaves no room for minority identities or alternative sources of meaning and belonging. This homogenization is not only a tragedy for Uyghurs and other minorities, but for all of humanity, as unique cultural traditions and ways of life are erased. The Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (UAR), China and beyond represent one of the most severe and Systemic assaults on religious freedom and cultural rights in the modern era. It is a moral imperative for the international community to stand up to this repression and defend the rights of Uyghurs and all religious minorities in China. Anything less is a betrayal of our shared humanity and the values of religious freedom and cultural diversity that we claim to hold dear.

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(\*1) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/25/shadian-last-major-islamic-style-mosque-in-china-loses-its-domes>

(\*2) <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/udner-the-guise-of-public-safety-12192016140127.html>

(\*3) <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/udner-the-guise-of-public-safety-12192016140127.html>

(\*4) <https://muslimmirror.com/eng/destruction-of-islamic-architecture-in-china/>

(\*5) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/7/5/chinese-uyghurs-defy-ramadan-ban>

(\*6) <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/chinas-repression-of-the-hui-a-slow-boil/>

(\*7) <https://www.voanews.com/a/landmark-beijing-mosque-gives-way-to-sinicization-program-/7240125.html>

(\*8) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-65743609>