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Ahmet Ertan Çölgeçen*

Authoritarian Cooperation Beyond Borders: The Uyghur Diaspora in Turkey–China Relations

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* ahmet.colgecen@hacettepe.edu.tr - Department of Turkish Studies, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1282-8879

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Bielefeld University
Faculty of Sociology
Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD)
Postfach 100131
D-33501 Bielefeld
Homepage: http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/ag_comcad/

Abstract

This article advances the study of transnational repression by highlighting the neglected role of host states. Empirically, it examines how the arrival of thousands of Uyghur refugees in Turkey between 2014 and 2016 was instrumentalized through state mechanisms and diaspora networks, producing new authoritarian spaces beyond its borders and exposing refugees to heightened vulnerabilities. This process not only intensified the precarity of Uyghurs abroad but also contributed to the legitimization of Beijing's narrative of Uyghur "terrorism". Conceptually, the article challenges the dominant "sending state" perspective by demonstrating that transnational repression is a co-produced process shaped by the regime type and strategic interests of host states. This also demonstrates how transnational spaces can be reproduced both through state intervention and through diaspora organizations. By analyzing Turkey's authoritarian turn alongside its pragmatic cooperation with China, the study contributes to debates on authoritarian cooperation, diaspora governance, and the global diffusion of illiberal norms.

Keywords: transnational repression, authoritarian cooperation, Uyghur diaspora, transnational spaces

Introduction

With increasing centralization of power, erosion of the rule of law, and systematic pressure on the opposition over the last decade, Turkey has come to be categorized as a "competitive authoritarian" regime (Levitsky and Way 2020). This authoritarian turn has also manifested itself distinctly in Turkey's domestic and foreign policies towards diasporas. The Justice and Development Party/Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (thereafter AKP) government has increasingly grounded its discourse and practices concerning diaspora communities on an ideological basis, constructing a "selective regime of belonging" that defines only Sunni-Islamist and ethno-nationalist groups as the category of licit citizens. This vision, converging with a neo-Ottoman foreign policy orientation, has aimed not only to reduce the diaspora to a pro-regime, controllable, and ideologically compliant mass, but has also entailed repressive strategies that exclude and criminalize oppositional diaspora actors (Baser and Ozturk 2020; Yabanci 2019). For instance, Turkey's own global repression campaign which has targeted more than 132 individuals in at least thirty-eight countries (Gorokhovskaia et al. 2023), has made it more cooperative towards similar actions by other authoritarian regimes. The AKP government's diaspora vision exerts a similar effect on the different diaspora communities residing in Turkey. As Dukalskis et al. (2022) demonstrate, authoritarian host states can enhance the origin state's repressive capacity through both direct and indirect means when interest-based partnerships are at stake. In this regard, the repressive strategies of authoritarian regimes over diasporas are closely linked to the regime type of the host state. The threats faced by the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey are not merely a result of China's unilateral transnational repression policies; they are also a consequence of Turkey's own authoritarian turn and the pragmatic cooperation it has developed with China, centered on "mutual authoritarian interests" (Yilmaz and Eliküçük Yıldırım 2020). While the literature often conceptualizes this phenomenon as the unilateral "long arm" of the repressive state, this approach risks overlooking the pragmatic role played by host states (Michaelsen and Ruijgrok 2023). This study posits that transnational repression is not solely an act of the sending state but rather a "co-produced" process, shaped by the strategic interests of the host state.

The fundamental shift in the AKP government's policy toward diasporas gained momentum with the regime's departure from Western democratic norms and its entry into a process of authoritarian consolidation. This process began with the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and was solidified by the 2016 coup attempt (Akçay 2020), alongside the deepening of Turkey's economic and political ties

with authoritarian states such as China (Alemdaroglu and Tepe 2020). China's investments and financial support under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have prompted the AKP to shift its traditional protective discourse on the Uyghur issue toward an axis of geopolitical and economic pragmatism (Eliküçük Yıldırım 2023). This shift has become concrete through the evolution of President Erdoğan's position, which—years after he labeled the 2009 events in Xinjiang "genocide"—has evolved to a stance that adopts China's "counter-terrorism" narrative and views Uyghur activism as an element detrimental to Turkey-China relations (Jardine 2022; Klimeš 2020). This cooperation is characterized by the two countries adopting a joint stance against Western criticism on democracy and human rights, emphasizing the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs", and embracing similar securitizing discourses. In this process, the political activities of the Uyghur diaspora have been framed as a national security threat, and the diaspora's room for maneuver has been restricted. The AKP has transformed the Uyghur issue from a human rights framework into a bargaining chip with China. In turn, Uyghur diaspora organizations in Turkey, to maintain their legitimacy, have adopted a discourse aligned with the AKP's official ideology; inward-looking Islamist diaspora structures have been supported and co-opted into the government's hegemony. For the diaspora, this has meant a loss of both protection and political autonomy. Today, in the face of increasing pressure, the primary goal for many Uyghurs has shifted from political activism to a struggle for survival. This situation demonstrates, as Michaelsen and Ruijgrok (2023) have noted, how a host country's departure from democratic norms can transform into a vital security risk for the most vulnerable communities it hosts on its territory.

Adopting the post-9/11 "global war on terror" narrative, Beijing has coded any form of cultural and religious expression related to Uyghur identity as a potential threat of "terrorism, separatism, and extremism" (Clarke 2018; Rodríguez-Merino 2022). Through official reports published in 2001 and 2002, China presented the previously little-known East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a global threat linked to Al-Qaeda, thereby placing its domestic security issue on a footing of global legitimacy (Purbrick 2017: 242; Roberts 2018a: 105). This strategic reframing resonated internationally, culminating in the US and UN listing ETIM as a terrorist organization (Vuori 2023: 156), which provided China with the diplomatic shield it needed for the extraordinary measures it would implement in Xinjiang (Potter and Wang 2022: 55; Roberts 2018a: 106, 2018b: 233). This situation thus helped China to construct a narrative of itself as a long-suffering victim of terrorism (Li 2019: 317). This legitimization framework has increasingly been presented as the international justification for a mass repression campaign, particularly following the 2009 Ürümqi riots. China's efforts to disseminate this narrative globally have closely affected the policies in countries where the Uyghur diaspora has sought refuge.

Between 2014–2016, a migration route that stretched from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, continuing via Southeast Asia, and extending to Turkey, had transformed into not only a quest for humanitarian asylum, but also a political stage where regional and global power relations intersected. During this period, thousands of Uyghurs fled intensifying state repression in China and reached Turkey through South Asian countries. However, a portion of this migration movement was steered to the conflict zones in Syria, in line with the interests of the Turkish government. Uyghurs who entered Turkey with their families on counterfeit passports (Makinen and Johnson 2015) were not granted refugee status by the government; instead, they were provided with temporary residence permits. On the other hand, through opaque Uyghur diaspora organisations in Turkey, they were encouraged to go to Syria with promises of a better life, religious freedom, and schools for their children. Indeed, many studies have emphasized that the presence of Uyghur warriors in Syria created functional opportunities for the Turkish government (Clarke and Kan 2017; Pantucci 2018; Roberts 2018a). According to the participants' accounts, during this period, more than 10,000 people reached Turkey through official and unofficial channels. More than half of this number, rather than being granted asylum in Turkey, were directed along with their families to Syria via bureaucratic permission mechanisms, diaspora NGO networks, and human trafficking channels along the southern border; moreover, human rights activists who opposed this practice were subjected to death threats (Elveren 2014).

The focus of this article is that Uyghurs who fled from China between 2014–2016 and reached Turkey via Southeast Asia were not utilized by the AKP government under the discourse of "humanitarian protection", but rather instrumentalized as a strategic tool in line with the urgent needs of Turkey's Syria policy. The findings show that the primary motivation of the Uyghurs was not to wage jihad, but to survive and establish a new life; however, certain state apparatuses in Turkey steered this humanitarian flow to the Syrian region with the objective of creating an indirect military capacity. This practice of instrumentalization has also produced an outcome that legitimizes the "jihadist" and "terrorist" framework that China has been trying to construct against the Uyghurs for years. Turkey's rhetoric and practices have shifted from "brotherhood and protection" (Reuters 2015) to an emphasis on "terrorism and separatism" (Tian 2017), while the profiles of Uyghur warriors that have become visible in Syria have fed into Beijing's stigmatizing narrative of "jihadism" presented to the global public. This situation has moved transnational repression beyond the unilateral intervention of the homeland, creating an interest-driven, implicit, and authoritarian form of cooperation that serves the interests of the host state. The empirical basis for our arguments is formed by semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with nine Uyghur participants who were directed to the war in Syria between 2014-2016, and with representatives of seven key diaspora

institutions in Turkey and Germany. These interviews allow us to understand firsthand the participants' motivations, their journey experiences, and the roles of government officials and diaspora institutions in Turkey in the process of steering them to Syria. The study argues that the regime type of the host state determines the form of the emerging transnational repression. Accordingly, a competitive authoritarian regime like Turkey neither fully allows China's direct operations nor engages in full cooperation. Instead, it creates a pragmatic "third way" that serves its own strategic objectives.

1 | **Diasporas and the politics of transnational social spaces**

In the last few decades, the dramatic increase in global migration flows has led states to reshape their transnational spheres of influence. While millions of people crossing borders each year in search of a new life reconfigure their spatial, ontological, and emotional forms of belonging within transnational social spaces, many states, in turn, develop comprehensive diaspora governance policies through legal regulations, political tools, and institutional structures to expand their transnational influence. Diasporas represent a distinct and specific form of the phenomenon of transnational community. Transnational communities emerge when they establish durable ties extending beyond the borders of at least two nation-states. These ties create transnational social spaces, understood as cross-border spheres of social interaction where identities, social relations, and networks are constantly created and reshaped (Faist 2000; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Indeed, it is necessary to consider that transnational communities have multiple forms of belonging (Glick Schiller 2009; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). One must recognize that while diasporas constitute a form of transnational community, not all transnational communities can be classified as diasporas (Bauböck and Faist 2010). Positioning diasporas as non-state actors in international politics would be a controversial approach (Koinova 2010). Certainly, these social spaces are determined not only by community dynamics but also by states' migration, citizenship, security, and diaspora policies (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003); these regulations, incentives, and constraints directly affect the architecture of the space by shaping diasporas' cross-border mobility, organization, and political influence (Faist 2000, 2015).

Numerous studies demonstrate that the architecture of these transnational spaces is conditioned by both diasporic practices and state interventions, showing how governments develop governance strategies to mobilize and regulate diaspora politics (Gamlen 2014; Ragazzi 2014). Although these governance strategies vary according to the normative priorities of the regime type (Baser

and Ozturk 2020) and its ethnic politics (Waterbury 2018), they focus on steering emigrant communities abroad in accordance with national interests, mobilizing them around specific political objectives, and redefining diasporic belonging (Délano 2011; Tsourapas 2015; Mylonas 2013). In recent years, scholars have comprehensively demonstrated how sending states institutionalize their politics through tools such as voting rights (Collyer 2014; Lafleur 2013), multiple citizenship policies (Mügge 2012), and diaspora ministries (Gamlen 2019).

The dynamics of transnational spaces are deeply conditioned by the political and institutional environment of host states. These contexts shape both the forms of belonging that diasporas articulate and the power relations that emerge among them (Baser and Féron 2022. Host states seek to govern and redefine the diaspora communities residing within their borders through various political, legal, and institutional mechanisms to protect their own national interests (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Lewis 2015; Marinova 2017). Moreover, asymmetric power relations within diaspora communities are often reconstituted in different forms under the influence of the host country's socio-political and institutional conditions. The regime type of the host state can generate significant shifts in the balance of power between groups; such shifts, in turn, may lead to conflicts and fragmentations within the diaspora (Baser 2015; Féron 2017). Against this backdrop, our analysis approaches host states as actors that intervene in transnational social spaces, influencing and instrumentalizing diasporas within their territories for political purposes.

2 | **The transnational repression repertoire of authoritarian states**

The political landscape of the twenty-first century is being reshaped as authoritarian regimes develop modalities of political control that transcend their geographical borders. While the technological, economic, and social ties engendered by globalization have been viewed as an opportunity for the diffusion of democratic ideals, they are also being utilized by authoritarian states as a means to project their "transnational repression" apparatus on a global scale. This has created a new reality in which traditional protection mechanisms for individuals fleeing political persecution are being seriously eroded. For dissidents, activists, and minority groups, leaving their home state no longer signifies an absolute escape from repression, as they find they cannot fully "exit" from the domestic political sphere. With the rise of global authoritarianism, policies targeting not only opponents within their own borders but also members of the diaspora abroad have become widespread, bringing the concept of transnational repression to the centre of international political literature.

In recent decades, a growing body of empirical research has revealed that the diaspora policies of authoritarian states are profoundly linked with issues of security, identity, domestic politics, and claims of sovereignty. These findings indicate that transnational repression has acquired a structural dimension within the foreign policies of authoritarian states. Glasius (2018) has provided a theoretical foundation for this trend through the conceptualization of "extraterritorial authoritarian practices", while Moss (2016) has classified the facets of this repression into a systematic typology. Placing these analyses within a broader framework, Dukalskis (2021) has linked transnational repression to the quest for "making the world safe for dictatorship", revealing the connections that are forged between regime security and diaspora control. Furthermore, Fürstenberg et al. (2021) have emphasized the borderless nature of transnational repression, arguing that geographical borders, rather than being an obstacle to repression, have become a spatial opportunity, as states "spatialize" their authoritarian practices into the countries where migrant populations reside. While these approaches necessitate a rethinking of classical concepts of sovereignty and borders, they have also turned the global mobility of authoritarianism into an object of political analysis (Conduit 2020; Lewis 2015).

Authoritarian regimes and non-state actors aim to silence dissident voices, hinder political activism, suppress alternative narratives, and reproduce the regime's legitimacy abroad (Adamson 2019; Moss 2016, 2022; Tsourapas 2021). The repertoire of repression utilized to achieve these aims is highly diverse. These methods of repression include digital surveillance and harassment (Michaelsen 2018), proxy punishment directed at family members (Moss et al. 2022), informant networks and surveillance within diaspora communities (Jörum 2015; Turner 2013), physical attacks or assassinations (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021), the instrumentalization of international institutions such as Interpol for political purposes (Lemon 2019), and forced renditions, as well as visa and passport revocations (Grossman and Hobbins 2024).

Behind this systematic repression lies not only regime security but also an architecture of authoritarian norms that is reproduced on a global scale. Tsourapas (2021) argues that authoritarian regimes establish a global regime architecture that links together strategies of repression, legitimation, and co-optation. Within this architecture, authoritarian regimes not only control their own diasporas but also learn from each other's practices, cooperate, and often reproduce their own authoritarianism by instrumentalizing democratic norms. Moreover, transnational repression has also become intertwined with the activities of non-state actors within the diaspora, and the micro-level forms of repression that these actors create. Adamson (2019) demonstrates that "non-state authoritarian actors" act as hegemonic powers within their own diaspora communities, controlling

community members through repression, threats, and ideological imposition. As Délano Alonso and Mylonas (2019) emphasize, it is necessary to analyse the diaspora by "disaggregating" it; indeed, while some groups or individuals choose to cooperate with the origin state, others actively reconstruct their dissident identities in order to engage with homeland politics despite this repressive environment (Moss 2022).

Moreover, home states simultaneously utilize both repression and incentive strategies in order to keep diaspora communities under control (Baser and Ozturk 2020). This dual strategy allows regimes, on the one hand, to repress dissidents by labelling them as "traitors", while on the other hand, staging loyal diaspora segments as the "good diaspora" by rewarding them with cultural events, economic opportunities, or symbolic statuses (Turner 2013; Hirt and Mohammad 2018).

In recent years, numerous scholars (Böcü and Baser 2022; Brand 2010; Dalmasso et al. 2018; Lemon 2019) have revealed the empirical reality of visible policies by focusing on the concrete aspects of this repression: namely, how states monitor, threaten, and intimidate dissidents through their institutional extensions such as embassies, consulates, international institutions, and even religious organizations. Such forms of repression not only violate the fundamental rights and freedoms of targeted groups but also undermine the sovereignty of host countries (Baser and Féron 2022). Indeed, in some cases, host states can become indirect or direct accomplices in this repression according to their own strategic interests (Lewis 2015; Quinsaat 2024). Strategic alliances or economic interdependencies with the origin state may lead host states to tolerate, or even tacitly facilitate, transnational repression despite prevailing human rights norms (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Marinova 2017).

These academic debates broadly show that state sovereignty is no longer confined to territorial integrity; rather, a state's claim to authority over its own citizens (and former citizens) has reached a global dimension, unsettling the core norms of both international relations and international human rights law.

3 | **Abandoning democracy: Authoritarian cooperation in Turkey-China relations**

The phenomenon of authoritarian cooperation has been shaped within a power vacuum that emerged with the weakening of Western liberal hegemony. The main actors of this cooperation are China and Russia, defined as "black knights" for reducing like-minded regimes' dependency

on the West by offering military, economic, and diplomatic alternatives (Levitsky and Way 2010). While the post-Cold War dominance of the West made it difficult for autocratic regimes to gain external legitimacy, in the 21st century, transnational relations have offered opportunities for the transfer of knowledge regarding the tools and techniques of authoritarian governance, and authoritarian regimes have become adept at ensuring mutual legitimation through various methods (Cooley 2015). Events such as the Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring, in particular, were perceived by authoritarian regimes as a direct threat to their own security, pushing them to cooperate and develop countermeasures (Koesel and Bunce 2013). This cooperation is often pragmatic in nature, prioritizing principles of "state sovereignty" and "non-interference in internal affairs" over liberal values. The primary objective of authoritarian cooperation is the construction of a new multipolar international order through creating institutional alternatives, safeguarding one another in the international arena, and disseminating illiberal ideologies on a global scale (Cooley and Nexon 2020). In recent years, numerous studies have elaborated on the diffusion processes of authoritarianism (Ambrosio 2010), inter-regime promotion (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2015), interest-based cooperation (Weyland 2017), and its pragmatic motivations (Von Soest 2015).

Authoritarian cooperation is not confined to authoritarian regimes, as it also includes illiberal and populist right-wing forces within the West. Authoritarian states seeking to distance themselves from Western political norms, such as Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Iran, and Turkey, have also joined this cooperation network from below (Cooley and Nexon 2020). Turkey's trend towards authoritarianism has accelerated with the authoritarian consolidation process it entered after the 2016 coup attempt, during which the regime completely broke from Western democratic norms under a state of emergency (Akçay 2020). This process has been further bolstered by the deepening of economic and political ties with authoritarian states like China and Russia (Çolakoğlu 2021).

The AKP government intensified its efforts to suppress social opposition and tighten its control over the media in the wake of the 2013 Gezi Park protests. The collapse of the Kurdish peace process in 2015 led to a resumption of conflict in Southeast Anatolia, where curfews, urban demolitions, and the appointment of government trustees to replace elected local officials deepened democratic backsliding at the regional level. The state of emergency declared after the 2016 coup attempt institutionalized authoritarian consolidation through the suppression of the opposition, the weakening of judicial independence, and the transition to a presidential system (Akçay 2020; Akkoyunlu 2021; Öniş and Kutlay 2020). During this period, criticism from the West regarding democracy and human rights was framed by the government as an "interference in its internal affairs" (Yilmaz and Eliküçük Yıldırım 2020). This process has also enabled the government to create a

populist “anti-Western narrative” to bolster its domestic support (Çolakoğlu 2021; Öniş and Yalikun 2021).

Accordingly, the AKP government has pivoted towards Asia-centric authoritarian actors through its search for alternative alliances, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. As normative ties with the West have weakened, the security-centric cooperation developed with countries like China, based on the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs”, has become one of the main pillars of “authoritarian solidarity” (Akkoyunlu 2021; Eliküçük Yıldırım 2023; Yilmaz and Eliküçük Yıldırım 2020). This political climate has laid the groundwork for the growing authoritarian cooperation between Turkey and China. The two countries have developed similar discourses against Western criticism on human rights and democracy, and the principles of “sovereignty” and “non-interference” have become central to their joint diplomacy (Cooley and Nexon 2020). In the economic sphere, the financing offered by China within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a significant alternative for Turkey, providing both an escape from Western political conditionality and a crucial source of funding. From Beijing’s perspective, Turkey has been positioned as a strategic partner that is not only a key country in the “Middle Corridor” but also one that can help carry China’s security and development model into Eurasia (Güneylioğlu 2022). Furthermore, the BRI serves China’s objective of using its economic power to shape the policies and development trajectories of other countries in line with its own interests, an agenda that entails much more than simply constructing infrastructure projects. By eroding the established norms of the international order, China legitimizes its economic and political goals while promoting the global diffusion of its own norms and standards (Eliküçük Yıldırım 2022: 186). Through the BRI, China offers similar deals to its neighbours in Central Asia, where it has demanded cooperation against Uyghur “terrorism” in exchange for investments (Lemon et al. 2024). This geoeconomic governance model creates a conducive environment for China’s transnational repression activities. Countries like Turkey and the Central Asian states, which are becoming economically dependent on the BRI, are progressively losing their capacity to resist China’s demands concerning Uyghur communities within their territories (Jardine 2022; Kellner and Frangville 2023; Potter and Wang 2022).

Hence, the Turkey-China relationship has acquired the characteristics of a “pragmatic authoritarian cooperation”. This cooperation is marked by the adoption of a common stance against Western criticism on democracy and human rights, an emphasis on the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs”, and the embrace of similar securitized discourses. As Michaelsen and Ruijgrok (2023) have shown, this type of cooperation can function as a “transmission belt”, enabling the two states to mutually learn authoritarian methods and serving to legitimize their own forms of govern-

ance against Western pressure for democracy and human rights. In this process, the political activities of the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey have been framed as a national security threat, and the diaspora's room for maneuver has been restricted. The government only raises the issue of the Uyghurs before elections. In order to consolidate nationalist voters within the country, it criticized China's policies toward the Uyghurs just one month before the 2019 elections and has continued its previous stance since the elections (Tanchum 2019). The AKP has transformed the Uyghur issue from a human rights concern into a bargaining chip with China. While Eurasianist groups like the Patriotic Party have become the government's de facto allies, "so-called nationalist" political groups, such as the Nationalist Action Party and the Idealist Hearths, have remained silent on the Uyghur cause since 2015 (Akkoyunlu 2021; Çolakoğlu 2021; Eliküçük Yıldırım 2023). At the same time, journalists affiliated with media outlets cooperating with China have frequently undertaken visits to Xinjiang (Kerimu, 2024), producing narratives that portray Muslim Uyghurs as free from repression and thereby contributing to the legitimization of this discourse. In response, Uyghur diaspora organizations in Turkey have adopted a discourse aligned with the AKP's official ideology to maintain their legitimacy, and inward-looking Islamic diaspora structures have established closer ties with the state. The tendency of Western-based Uyghur diaspora organizations to belittle and marginalize conservative diaspora groups in Turkey has also played a role in this dynamic. For the diaspora, this has meant both a form of protection and a loss of political autonomy. Faced with increasing pressure, the primary goal for many Uyghurs has become a struggle for "survival" rather than political activism.

4 | **Rethinking the identity of the "Zhonghua minzu": Footprints of colonial violence in China**

The policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) toward Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim communities in the Xinjiang (East Turkestan) autonomous region represent one of the most systematic examples of contemporary state violence. While the roots of this local violence lie in China's long-standing colonial policies in the region (Anand 2018; Gladney 1998; Millward 2021) and the collectivist traumas of the Mao era (Bellér-Hann 2015), its ideological foundation is fueled by the logic of the party-state's ultimate goal: the "Sinicization" project (Smith Finley 2013)—a project aimed at permanently securing the region through the elimination of the indigenous society and its culture. Within this framework, cultural elements that define Uyghur identity—such as language, religion, and historical memory—have been viewed by the CCP as a direct threat to the state's unitary structure and ideological hegemony, and their elimination has been targeted (Bovingdon

2010; Smith Finley 2020). Consequently, for the CCP to gain international legitimacy for such a comprehensive assimilation project aimed at destroying cultural identity, a robust discursive framework was required. In response to this need, after 9/11, the government redefined all ethnic, religious, and cultural differences in the region indiscriminately through the narrative of the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Roberts 2018b; Rodríguez-Merino 2022), adopting a securitization strategy aimed at achieving legitimacy at the global level (Kam and Clarke 2021; Smith Finley 2019; Tobin 2020).

Beijing's "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism", officially launched in May 2014, was formally presented as a response to escalating clashes and unrest in Xinjiang. Yet, the modalities of its implementation reveal that the campaign extended far beyond "counter-terrorism", serving instead as a vehicle for the systematic transformation and assimilation of Uyghur society. The state framed all dimensions of Uyghur identity as potential threats to national security, ethnic unity, and social stability, thereby securitizing and criminalizing cultural and religious expression.

Thus, under the guise of counter-terrorism, the party-state has implemented a range of interventions: the removal of the Uyghur language from education (Grose 2019; Mahmut and Smith Finley 2022), the destruction of mosques and shrines (Dillon 2015; Thum 2020), concentration camps and mass detentions (HRW 2021; OHCHR 2022; Zenz 2024), forced labor (Murphy and Elimä 2021), technology-assisted surveillance (Byler 2022; Roche and Leibold 2022), birth control, sterilization, and the separation of families (Ruser and Leibold 2021; Thum 2021), and the systematic destruction of cultural heritage (Hayes 2022; Smith Finley 2022). These measures collectively constitute the planned social death (Tobin 2021) of Uyghur identity.

The policies pursued by the CCP in the Xinjiang region are largely independent of the officially stated justification of counter-terrorism. These practices are the culmination of a long-term project aimed at transforming Xinjiang's demographic, cultural, and spatial structure to align the region with a Han-centric national identity. Policies of ethno-cultural diversity, conducted within a relatively pluralistic framework in the past, have in recent years given way to overtly assimilationist approaches. This transformation reflects the core vision of constructing a singular, homogenous, and nationalist *Zhonghua minzu* national identity—what Xi Jinping defines as the "deepest level of cultural identity". Zhonghua is an ethno-hierarchical construct that frames China as a "continuous 5,000-year civilization" and, within its Han-centric narrative, produces other ethnic groups as "non-Chinese barbarians" and "backward peoples". While this narrative appears inclusive by Sinicizing

ethnic minorities through cultural conformity, it operates on an exclusionary logic by positioning them as less “Chinese” than the “Han” (Bovingdon 2010; Tobin 2020).

The CCP regime’s radical policy shift from ethnic pluralism to assimilation, by presenting the *Zhonghua minzu* national identity as a superior cultural paradigm, reproduces the very colonial practices it disavows in its own historical narratives. Policies of “fusion”, conducted in the name of a common Zhonghua consciousness, contradict the CCP’s supposedly anti-colonial stance, manifesting as the forced transformation and erasure of the identities of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim communities, particularly in the Xinjiang region. Although Western colonialism is constantly condemned in the Party’s official discourse, the processes in practice constitute typical examples of colonial violence.

5 | **The Chinese dream: The genealogy of transnational repression**

China’s policies of transnational repression against the Uyghurs, situated within a historical continuity extending back to the mid-20th century, have been shaped by the extension of domestic security priorities beyond its borders. In its early years, the CCP viewed the quest for independence in “East Turkestan” as part of its own revolution and treated it as an entirely domestic matter. The Party’s primary objective in this initial period was to consolidate the region’s integration with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and to isolate it from Soviet influence (Forbes 1986, 233; Roberts 2004, 217). In pursuit of this goal, numerous Turkic leaders were eliminated through political purges, and state-led collectivist land reforms were implemented (Millward and Tursun 2004). From a perspective inherited from Chinese imperial tradition, “backward peoples” (Barabantseva 2009) who had not adopted Han civilization were historically constructed as an existential threat to the identity and integrity of the Chinese state (Millward 2021, 265-266). The Party-state aimed to dissolve the Uyghur national identity within the Zhonghua Minzu discourse (Bovingdon 2010); this ideological objective was reinforced by erasing the region’s independent history (Bovingdon 2004), institutionalizing Han settler colonialism through state security apparatuses (PAP and PLA) and construction corps (Bingtuan) (Shichor 2004) and establishing absolute control over natural resources (Gladney 2004). Thereby, it aimed to eliminate the possibility of the minoritized region (Gladney 1998) seceding from the state.

Following the 1949 communist takeover, thousands of Uyghurs and Kazakhs fled China, seeking refuge in Turkey via South Asia. From the early 1950s onwards, Turkey became a key sanctuary and center of activity for prominent Uyghur nationalist leaders such as Isa Yusuf Alptekin and

Mehmet Emin Bugra. For many years, these leaders actively worked in Turkey to preserve Uyghur identity and to keep alive the goal of an independent "East Turkestan". These efforts involved both appealing to anti-communist sentiments in the Muslim world and establishing ties with Turkish political leaders who held Pan-Turkist inclinations (Besson 1998; Landau 1995).

Although the CCP rhetorically viewed the diaspora as a threat, its capacity for transnational repression during the Cold War was quite limited. There were several key reasons for Beijing's inaction on this issue. The first was China's own international isolation. Notably, the absence of diplomatic relations with Turkey until 1971 constrained Beijing's ability to exert pressure on Ankara (Colakoglu 2015). Second, China's strategic priorities were focused on internal consolidation and more pressing threats from the Soviet Union (Clarke 2007). Consequently, this rhetoric had no concrete impact on diaspora activities. The collapse of the Soviet Union eliminated the geopolitical buffer provided by the Cold War, creating new, weak, and unstable Central Asian states on China's western flank that were open to Beijing's economic and political influence. This new strategic landscape forced Beijing to take the international dimension of the "Uyghur issue" seriously and to adopt a more proactive strategy (Colakoglu 2015; Clarke 2011). From the early 1990s onwards, the CCP began to actively exert pressure on Turkey and the newly established Central Asian states to curb Uyghur activism, using its growing economic and political power as leverage (Shichor 2003; Clarke 2017b). This marked the moment the PRC shifted from a reactive stance to a proactive and securitized policy aimed at actively managing and suppressing the Uyghur diaspora.

This approach by the CCP underwent a qualitative transformation, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, through the strategic instrumentalization of the global "war on terror" discourse (Rodríguez-Merino 2018, 30; Trédaniel and Lee 2017, 16). This transformation enabled China to legitimize its counter-insurgency policies in Xinjiang by presenting them as part of a global struggle (Steele and Kuo 2007, 2). One of the most significant elements of this strategy was the retrospective reframing of past events (Potter and Wang 2022, 149). Whereas before 9/11 Beijing generally framed unrest in Xinjiang as a "domestic security risk", it subsequently shifted its discourse to a narrative of "terrorism" (Roberts 2018a, 104). This situation thus helped China to construct a narrative of itself as a long-suffering victim of terrorism. The policy of "national rejuvenation", framed in line with the *China Dream* (Zhōngguó Mèng) vision adopted after the 2009 Ürümqi incidents and under Xi Jinping's rule post-2014 (Clarke 2017a; Purbrick 2017), is contingent upon achieving the internal unity and homogenization of the Zhonghua minzu. This comprehensive regime of domestic re-

pression by the Party-state is conducted in parallel with a severe policy of transnational repression.

6 | **China's transnational repression mechanisms**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) conducts the most systematic, comprehensive, and sophisticated campaign of transnational repression (Frustenberg et al. 2025; Jardine 2022; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021). A 2024 report by Freedom House, based on a ten-year analysis of data, identifies China as the world's most systematic and pervasive perpetrator of transnational repression by a wide margin (Vaughan et al. 2025). According to the report, of the 1,219 direct, physical cases of transnational repression recorded globally between 2014 and 2024, 272—approximately 22%—were committed by China. While the PRC's global policies target a wide range of groups—including Tibetans, Hong Kong democracy activists, Falun Gong practitioners, and regime dissidents—the group on which this repression is most intensely and brutally focused is the Uyghur diaspora.

The CCP's transnational repression policies represent a global export of the "preventive repression" doctrine (Greitens et al. 2020), a strategy developed in the dystopian laboratories of Xinjiang that codes every sphere of social life as a potential threat. The party-state's repertoire of transnational repression targeting Uyghurs residing in various geographies is extensive; practices such as coercion-by-proxy, through which individuals abroad are blackmailed via their family members and forced to become informants (Amnesty International 2020, 2021; Judah 2023; Tobin and Elimä 2023; UHRP 2017); the abuse of forced return agreements and consular channels (Carrdus 2023; Jardine and Greer 2022; Muller 2021); the instrumentalization of international organizations like INTERPOL (Safeguard Defenders 2021; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021; Frustenberg et al. 2025); the manipulation of United Nations platforms via CCP-organized fake NGOs (GONGOs) (Cosic et al. 2025; Klimeš 2020; USCIRF 2025); and the deployment of proxy structures like overseas student associations and illegal overseas police stations (Amnesty International 2024; Thunø and Wang 2024) are among the repressive mechanisms in the CCP's repertoire.

Numerous reports published over several years have documented a consistent pattern of targeting the family members of Uyghurs remaining in China; this includes their detention, the placement of children under state supervision, and pressure exerted on parents to compel their relatives abroad to cease diaspora activities (Jardine et al. 2021, 2023). The work of Tobin and Elimä (2023) finds that the Chinese government's efforts to recruit Uyghurs to spy on their own communities—in ex-

change for promises of contact with their families or for material benefits—fundamentally undermines the social fabric and trust within the diaspora. A report by Carrdus (2023), based on an in-depth examination of 114 cases involving Uyghur refugees, details various forms of transnational repression enacted in different countries, including detentions, threats of deportation, residency cancellations, and coercion-by-proxy. Similarly, a UHRP (2017) report demonstrates that mobility controls, such as the refusal to renew or the cancellation of passports, render Uyghurs de facto stateless, pushing them into a legal limbo in their host countries and thereby increasing their risk of deportation. Furthermore, within the framework of strategic partnerships with Arab states, at least 292 Uyghurs were detained or forcibly returned to China between 2002 and 2022, with such actions often justified under the pretext of security cooperation agreements (Jardine and Greer 2022).

Academic studies and reports by investigative journalists in recent years have more clearly elucidated the institutional dimensions and empirical reality of this repression. Research by Cosic et al. (2025) documents that China has abused INTERPOL's Red Notice system, manipulated United Nations mechanisms through GONGOs, and established surveillance networks targeting the diaspora via digital platforms. China utilizes not only its official diplomatic missions, such as embassies and consulates, but also proxy structures like overseas police stations and overseas student associations as part of this global network of control (Thunø and Wang 2024). The report by Jardine et al. (2021) is also noteworthy. It documents that from 1997 to 2021, a total of 28 countries were either actively complicit in or condoned China's transnational repression. Countries in the Middle East and South Asia feature prominently in the report: according to the data, 647 cases were identified in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region and 665 in South Asia. These cases have involved the arrest of Uyghurs in their host countries, prolonged periods of detention, and direct repatriation to China. In total, at least 1,546 cases (1,151 detentions and 395 repatriations) have been recorded.

7 | **Uyghurs in Turkey: Under authoritarian collaboration**

The AKP government's policy shift toward the Uyghur diaspora has created an environment of "governmental precarity" actively produced by the state for Uyghurs in Turkey. The primary tools of this governmentality are wielded through residence permits and citizenship processes. For many Uyghurs, obtaining or renewing existing residence permits has become increasingly difficult, a situation that has left them in a constant state of legal uncertainty and under the threat of deportation

(Sezer 2019; Basu and Allen-Ebrahimian 2022). The extent to which this process has been politicized is shown by the rejection of citizenship applications from Uyghurs who participate in political activism or anti-China protests on grounds such as being a "national security risk", and the arrest of many and their transfer to removal centers (Alemdaroglu and Tepe 2020; Kakissis 2020; Kashgarian 2022). This situation, exacerbated by the Chinese consulate's refusal to provide services like passport renewal, pushes many Uyghurs into a de facto state of "statelessness", leaving them even more vulnerable to China's transnational repression (Safeguard Defenders 2023).

The precarious atmosphere created by these 'mutual authoritarian interests' is further deepened by the threat posed by the extradition agreement signed between the two countries in 2017 and ratified by China in 2020. The fact that the agreement has not yet been ratified by the Turkish Parliament has granted the AKP government immense control over the Uyghur diaspora. This situation has serious consequences for the diaspora's ability to engage in activism (Ayasun 2021; Butler 2021).

In recent years, there have been cases where individuals were held in detention centers, treated as "illegal immigrants", quietly sent to third countries, and from there, extradited to China (Browne 2020; Karadsheh and Tuysuz 2021). In its case study report, Freedom House determined that Turkey is no longer a safe haven for diaspora communities (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022). Indeed, as the research of Tobin and Elimä (2023) shows, 80% of Uyghurs in Turkey are directly threatened by Chinese officials. According to the Safeguard Defenders (2023) report, it has been determined that approximately 45% of Uyghurs living in Turkey have been pressured by Chinese intelligence through threats to their families' safety.

8 | **Methods**

This study analyzes the dynamics of transnational repression through the implicit cooperation practices between the host and home states. Processes such as the "co-production" of transnational repression—the core argument of this research—and the "instrumentalization" of diaspora communities for geopolitical objectives are, by their nature, not explicitly present in the official discourses of states. My focus on this topic emerged during my doctoral research on the transnationalization of the Uyghur diaspora, which I began in 2024. During my fieldwork, Uyghurs who travelled from Turkey to Syria were often spoken of in terms of ambiguity and uncertainty. This observation revealed the necessity of moving beyond rumors and anecdotal information to systematically investigate this humanitarian and political process and to understand it from an actor-oriented

perspective. This necessity formed the methodological foundation of the present study. Within this framework, an interpretive case study design, based on nine months of fieldwork between 2024 and 2025, was adopted. This approach has enabled an in-depth understanding of the human and institutional dimensions of transnational repression by centering the lived experiences of the actors and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences—aspects often overlooked in state-centric analyses. Accordingly, the study aimed to interpret the participants' motivations, link observations to theoretical concepts, establish causal relationships between events, and uncover silent meanings and implicit dynamics (Yin 2017).

The data collection process for the research is based on semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted in Turkey and Germany. To maximize the diversity of information and experience required by the study's theoretical framework, a combination of snowball and purposive sampling techniques was used. This strategy focused on two primary actor groups that could shed light on the different dimensions of the topic. Firstly, interviews were conducted in Istanbul with nine Uyghur participants who had personally experienced being channeled from Turkey to Syria between 2014 and 2016. These participants are of critical importance for understanding, from a bottom-up perspective, their motivations for fleeing China, their experiences within human trafficking networks, and how they were incorporated into a channeling mechanism by state and diaspora institutions in Turkey. Their narratives have formed the basis of my effort to understand the human tragedy and individual agency. Secondly, interviews with seven key representatives of Uyghur diaspora institutions in Turkey and Germany revealed the meso-level dynamics of the process. This group provided an institutional perspective on internal ideological divisions, relationships with the government, how oppositional actors were excluded, and how transnational networks operated. The inclusion of representatives in Germany provided the opportunity to comparatively analyze the effects of Turkey's policies on the global diaspora and to triangulate the findings. As the research is conducted with a vulnerable community exposed to serious trauma, ethical considerations were strictly adhered to at every stage of the process. To ensure the absolute safety of the participants, all narratives are anonymized, and pseudonyms such as 'P1' and 'P6' were used in the presentation of the findings. Details regarding the participants' activities in Syria and Turkey have been omitted from the study, and the names of diaspora representatives with ties to the government and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) who facilitated transfers to Syria are not disclosed.

9 | **Findings**

9.1 | ***Escape from China***

In the mid-2010s, the security regime in Xinjiang hardened significantly; widespread surveillance, arbitrary detentions, and the criminalization of religious practices pushed Uyghur households into an environment of unsustainable pressure. As China's growing security cooperation with neighbouring Central Asian states closed off traditional escape routes, Uyghurs were forced to create a migration corridor for themselves through Southeast Asia. This route, also referred to as an underground railroad, consisted of smuggling networks that often started in Yunnan and connected to routes through Vietnam–Laos and Thailand–Cambodia–Malaysia. Along this route, bribery was an almost systemic component. It was a network organized by human traffickers—encompassing bribe payments at border crossings, intermediaries to secure release from detention, forged/substitute documents, and lax enforcement in transit countries—where bribes of up to 10,000 dollar per person were paid. For the vast majority who managed to complete this arduous journey, the ultimate destination was Turkey, to which they felt culturally and religiously close. The accounts of participants P13 and P9 show that the primary motivation for this migration was a struggle to save their lives, rather than an ideological quest. This experience also reveals the incredibly vulnerable conditions under which the refugees traveled and how they became susceptible to all forms of influence:

> They loaded us into the back of a truck and set off. We passed through the jungles of Thailand. The smugglers were not like humans; they were like monsters. They would leave the weak behind and keep going. We forgot our humanity on that road; our only concern was to survive to the next day. Turkey was a dream for us [P13, 2025, Istanbul].

> I was imprisoned for being a teacher. When I got out, I had been branded a 'terrorist'; no one would even look at me. We had no choice but to flee. I cannot describe that journey… We walked for days on an empty stomach. One of the young people with us fell ill and died in our arms. We had to bury him right there on the spot and continue on. I was a respected person, a teacher, but on the road, I was nothing. Our only goal was to keep our family alive; we weren't thinking of anything else [P9, 2024, Istanbul].

Passage to Turkey was facilitated both with the help of official channels, such as the Turkish Embassy in Malaysia, and through the efforts of Turkey-based Uyghur diaspora leaders who traveled to Southeast Asia to persuade the refugees. P16 and P10, whom I interviewed in a small tea house in Sefaköy, Istanbul, described this process as follows:

> We were stuck for months in a place like a warehouse in Malaysia. We could neither move forward nor go back. Then, we slowly began to organize. We first made contact by phone with the director of a large Uyghur association in Turkey. He said, 'Don't worry, we won't leave you there'. Later, some people came to visit us. Through their guidance, some people from the Turkish Embassy also came and issued us travel documents. When we boarded the plane, we gave thanks, thinking we were finally saved. They were going to help us build a free life in Turkey... [P16, 2024, Istanbul].

> We stayed in a house with 10 people in Malaysia for nearly a year. We had lost hope. There, we met an association president who came from Istanbul. We collected money, started to organize... Our passports were prepared. We had no problems leaving Malaysia [P10, 2024, Istanbul].

9.2 | ***Warrior recruitment practices***

As Roberts (2018a) notes, the period between 2010 and 2016 witnessed one of the largest waves of Uyghur migration from China. According to the participants' accounts, more than 10,000 people reached Turkey through official and unofficial channels, and more than half of them were funneled to Syria. These "rescue" operations also laid the groundwork for diaspora organizations to create a sphere of influence and legitimacy over the Uyghurs who arrived in Turkey. Instead of granting official refugee status to Uyghur migrants, the government was reluctant to provide even temporary residence permits (Carrdus 2023; Sezer 2019). In this process, many Uyghurs were left in a legal limbo. At this point, structures such as Turkey-based Uyghur diaspora organizations and the interconnected Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), the successor to ETIM, came into play. New groups of refugees arriving at Istanbul airport were funneled to Syria by individuals affiliated with TIP, while some of them were later persuaded in the city of Kayseri. During that period, only a small fraction of the Uyghurs who arrived in Turkey joined ISIS, while a significant number became affiliated with the TIP (Reyhan 2019). P15 and P8, whom I met in Istanbul, stayed in Syria for a long time. Their accounts reveal how they encountered an organized funneling mechanism as soon as they set foot in Turkey:

> When I got off the plane, I didn't know what to do; I didn't have a single penny in my pocket. Outside, smiling people who spoke our language greeted us. 'Welcome, my brother', they said, and we all ate a meal together. They said, 'There are no jobs or opportunities in Turkey; you'll be miserable. We are building a new life in Syria, like our own state. You will have a salary, a house, and you can practice your religion freely...' I had to accept, and I found myself on a bus headed to Hatay... No one even offered me the option to stay in Turkey... [P15, 2025, Istanbul].

> This was already being discussed in Malaysia. The people who came from Turkey stated that we could bring our families with us. I brought my wife and children too. It wouldn't be fitting for a man to sit around idly here. People are suffering terribly in Syria... Knowing this, I joined the training [P8, 2024, Istanbul].

Refugee Uyghurs were offered housing in evacuated towns and schools for their children, along with "temporary" warrior roles. The diaspora organizations presenting these offers also kept the promise of an eventual return to Turkey and Turkish citizenship alive in their minds. A more significant motivation, however, was the desire of many Uyghurs to one day fight to liberate their homeland; Syria was also portrayed to them as an armed training ground. The accounts of P10 and P14 illustrate how the nationalist motivations of Uyghurs for going to Syria were exploited:

> We knew Assad was an ally of China. Of course, these weapons would one day return to East Turkestan. If we were to fight for our homeland, we had to get the best training. Syria was an opportunity for that... We wanted to learn to fight there and then return, not to die [P10, 2024, Istanbul].

> I received training as an imam. They said, 'come to Syria and teach our children'. I would be able to both teach and provide for my family… and of course, there was the thought that it would be experience for the homeland… [P14, 2025, Istanbul].

This process is closely linked to the radical transformation in Turkey's Syria policy. While the primary goal of the AKP government during the Arab Spring that began in 2011 was to overthrow the Assad regime, it completely changed its strategy following the failure of this policy and the strengthening of YPG-linked Kurdish groups in northern Syria. From 2015 onwards, the AKP government's priority in Syria was to prevent the formation of a YPG power structure on the Turkish border. This security-focused policy led Turkey to conduct a series of military operations in the Syria and to strategically align with religiously extremist organizations in order to gain room for

maneuver for these operations (Kösebalaban 2020). The presence and use of Uyghurs in Syria was also shaped as part of this new policy. Indeed, it was reported that during that period Turkey and Qatar supported the al-Nusra Front, to which the TIP was affiliated (Nordic Monitor 2021). Although TIP presents itself as a movement fighting for the independence of East Turkestan, over the past decade it has been unable to move beyond being a secondary actor in the proxy wars in Syria. In this respect, it differs from transnational organisations that aim to create mass mobilisation and achieve political autonomy. In addition, TIP's presence in Syria has shifted the Uyghur resistance on the international stage toward a Salafi ideological ground that increasingly prioritizes religious references (Clarke 2020; Gurcan 2015). As Lee and Yazici (2023) point out, China is using these developments concerning the Uyghurs as a pretext to intensify its repressive policies under the guise of preventive measures. Consequently, we see that authoritarian power is exercised through “assemblages” (Furstenberg et al. 2021) consisting of temporarily re-established actors, networks, and norms in different geographies.

9.3 | ***Spaces of exception: Non-state authoritarianism***

For many Uyghurs lacking official status and facing economic hardship in Turkey, the promise of an orderly life in Syria offered by diaspora organizations was seen as a pragmatic solution. This situation demonstrates, as Marinova (2017) notes, that diaspora engagement can also be a tool for regimes (or, in this case, powerful diaspora organizations) to co-opt and direct the diaspora for their own agendas. Diaspora organizations in Turkey, under the hegemony of TIP, promised Uyghur refugees that in exchange for going to Syria, they would receive military training, and their families would be cared for. The accounts of P6 and P1, the director of an Istanbul-based diaspora organization, reveals the deep division within the diaspora and the struggle that warrior recruitment networks waged against those who did not submit to them. This situation shows that the process was shaped not only by external dynamics but also by the conflict between collaborationist and resistant actors within the diaspora:

> In that period, in Sefaköy, there were individuals who would surround every new refugee who arrived. They had money, they had resources, they offered brilliant promises. While we were trying to keep one more family afloat with meager aid, they were massing busloads of young people at the border, calling it a struggle for both jihad and the homeland. When we stood up to them, they called us ‘traitors’. They threw our own people into the fire right before our eyes. Is it possible to fill buses with people from the airport and

> send them to another country's war without the state's knowledge? Of course, it wasn't… [P6, 2024, Istanbul].

> We knew what those TIP-affiliated associations were. They never cared about East Turkestan. It was even said that China once funded TIP, but they didn't care... They would label NGOs like us as 'puppets of the West' and would alienate the youth from us. They brainwashed the youth who went to Syria with concepts like 'ummah', which have nothing to do with our cause. Our hundred-year history of national struggle has nothing to do with this [P1, 2024, Istanbul].

Moss (2022) defines the transfer of political conflicts from the homeland to the diaspora as "conflict transference". TIP not only transfers an existing conflict but also creates a new one within the diaspora. It creates a deep fault line between the secular or moderate wing, which views the Uyghur cause as a "national struggle", and the radical wing, which sees it as a "global jihad". TIP's labeling of other Uyghur NGOs that do not share its views as "puppets of the West" clearly demonstrates how the practice of "non-state authoritarianism", as defined by Adamson (2019), operates within the diaspora—namely, the effort to establish hegemony by marginalizing rival groups.

Our research findings indicate that religiously conservative diaspora members tend to frame the Uyghur presence in Syria as a deterrent force against China, whereas those who identify as liberal perceive it as a factor undermining diaspora activism. This means that, conflicts within the Uyghur diaspora have also created a new cycle of conflict, (Féron 2017) differentiated by state intervention in transnational social spaces.

The account of diaspora activist P4 lays bare the overwhelming financial and logistical power possessed by TIP-affiliated networks. This shows that these networks were not just an ideological center of gravity, but that they also possessed hegemonic means to exploit the economic vulnerabilities of refugees with material resources, bringing "jihadism" and the Uyghur diaspora side-by-side. These funds, coming from the Gulf and other channels, constitute an example of what Cooley and Heathershaw (2017) call "transnational uncivil society"—the opaque and often illicit global financial networks that fund the activities of authoritarian or radical groups:

> We tried to tell the families in Turkey, 'Don't go to Syria, don't throw your children into the fire, let us help you with rent and food aid here'. But the money we collected meant nothing next to the millions coming from the Gulf and other dark channels... They were promising salaries, they were promising houses, while we were just trying to ensure they survived. An

> actual market had been created, and we were in a competition to avoid losing our own people to them. [P4, 2025, Istanbul].

The sovereignty of the modern state lies not merely in its capacity to enforce laws and possess a monopoly on violence, but fundamentally, in its power to suspend the juridical order itself and thereby stand outside of it. According to Agamben (1998), the sovereign, while acting with the authority granted by the law, is simultaneously the sole exceptional power capable of suspending that very law's validity. This power is embodied in the creation of a zone known as the "state of exception". The state of exception is a threshold of indistinction wherein the law withdraws without being abrogated, thereby collapsing the distinction between violence and law. Agamben's most striking thesis is that in the modern world, this exceptional condition is no longer a temporary instrument for crisis management but has become a permanent paradigm of government. Through threats to security, states normalize the exception, creating a sphere in which they are endowed with powers that perpetually operate outside the law. The diasporic Uyghur existence, in its most fundamental sense, possesses a "bare life" positioned at the threshold of the law. It is systematically severed from the legal protection of its homeland and is often deprived of political and juridical recognition within the sovereign sphere of the states in which it seeks refuge.

9.4 | ***Terrorist frames: Ungrievable lives***

Political frameworks determine which lives are publicly recognized and which are quietly overlooked. The fundamental logic of the practices of governmentality that states deploy in relation to diasporas operates through the capacity to determine which lives possess a recognizable ontological status. State power is, first and foremost, a power of "framing", and diasporic communities are situated at the very center of this sovereign practice. Authoritarian states often frame difference as a threat to national integrity. This deliberate act of framing symbolically separates them from the collective body of the nation and thereby constitutes the very ground upon which forms of legal and physical violence are prepared and legitimated. Pushed outside the frame of recognition, the life of the diasporic community is systematically rendered more exposed to danger, instability, and violence by both their states of origin and their host states.

When a life is deemed politically worthless and unworthy of protection, the suffering to which it is subjected, and even the loss of that life itself, is not recognized or met with a response in the public sphere as a loss. According to Butler (2009), for a life to be perceived as worthy of protection, it must first be recognized as "grievable". The mechanisms of war legitimize violence against certain

populations by framing them as “ungrievable”, thereby producing mass indifference. Ungrievability is not a consequence of the violence directed against them but is, on the contrary, the fundamental precondition that makes that violence possible. Thus, the symbolic act of framing initially established by the state ultimately materializes as a political and material reality that renders the life, and even the death, of the diasporic community insignificant.

While the primary motivation for Uyghurs who went to Syria was to live with dignity and build a future rather than to wage jihad, the apparatus of the AKP government and its affiliated diaspora networks channeled this humanitarian flow to Syria with the goal of creating an indirect military capacity. P7 and P4 state that this situation has caused irreparable damage to the legitimacy and image of the global Uyghur diaspora:

> The cause of East Turkestan was a cause of independence and human rights. But we suddenly found ourselves as part of other people’s wars. The TIP-affiliated associations in Istanbul sent our youth as ‘mercenaries’ under the name of ‘jihadist brotherhood’. It’s an open secret that they receive money per head for this. Beyond that, they inflicted irreparable harm on our people. They turned us into the hired warriors of the Middle East in the eyes of the world. This, truly, is the greatest betrayal of our cause [P7, 2025, Germany].

> These people had set out to live with dignity, but they found themselves in completely different geographies, in wars they did not understand. A network of power and interest was built on the blood of these people [P4, 2025, Istanbul].

The observations of P6, a diaspora organization director, regarding those returning from Syria lay bare one of the most tragic examples of our argument: the double victimhood experienced by instrumentalized individuals. This account shows that the host state can apply transnational repression not just as an extension of the home state, but for its own interests:

> We are with those who managed to return from Syria. They are shattered people. While they thought they were going for the homeland, they found themselves fighting completely different forces. Now they have returned, and the state that once turned a blind eye to their departure is now hunting them as terrorists to please China. They can neither return to East Turkestan nor are they safe here. Only those with money and those close to the Maarif Foundation (ETESA) were able to get citizenship here. We tried to rehabilitate them and reintegrate them into society, but our strength only goes so far [P6, 2024, Istanbul].

There are still Uyghurs in Turkey whose residence permits have not been renewed, and the government does not grant these individuals temporary residency rights either. According to participants, at present approximately two thousand Uyghurs are unable to secure the possibility of a permanent life in Turkey. This situation has led some refugees to still turn toward Syria or to attempt to reach Europe through human smuggling networks operating via Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This diaspora vision of Turkey has had the effect of internationally legitimizing the "jihadist" and "terrorist" framework that China has spent years trying to build against the Uyghurs. The armed Uyghur profile that became visible in Syria has fed the stigmatizing "terrorism" narrative that Beijing presents to the global public and has transformed into a concrete, confirmatory justification for China's policies of repression in Xinjiang. In other words, the policies of the diaspora's host state have laid the groundwork for the authoritarian home state to legitimize both its domestic and transnational repression policies. Unlike the unilateral intervention of the home state, this pragmatic "third way" policy of Turkey has created a covert form of transnational cooperation that serves the host state's own strategic interests.

It is estimated that there are currently around 15,000 Uyghurs living in Syria. Only 3,500 to 5,000 of them are in the position of warriors (Azhari and Al-Khalidi 2025; Farooq 2025). Hundreds of Uyghurs are engaged in agriculture and economic activities in residential areas. A Uyghur community has emerged in Syria, becoming institutionalized with its teachers, engineers, and doctors. Children receive education in their Uyghur mother tongue at schools (Guckelsberger 2025). On the other hand, the period under Ahmed al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani)—the former leader of al-Nusra (later HTS) who seized power in Syria and to whom the TIP was affiliated—came to be marked by sectarian massacres targeting especially Syriac Orthodox Christians and Alawites. Numerous reports indicate that these attacks were carried out not only by al-Sharaa's government forces but also with the participation of foreign warriors, including Uyghur warriors (Amnesty International 2025; Reuters 2025; USCIRF 2025). Although the TIP has not been directly associated with "terrorist" acts to date, under al-Sharaa's interim government it is being implicated in state violence and, alongside other foreign warriors in the region, carries the potential of becoming a scapegoat for the government's actions.

The accounts of P3 and P2 show how Turkey's policies have negatively affected the global perception of Uyghurs and how they have served China's propaganda:

> After 2016, because of Turkey's policy, everyone whom China called a 'terrorist' began to be considered a terrorist in Germany as well [P3, 2025, Germany].

> Do you know what was the most painful part? It was seeing Turkish officials, whom we had called 'brothers' for years, sign a 'counterterrorism cooperation' agreement with the Chinese. They are sending China the message that 'we have them under control'. Our cause has now been turned into a bargaining chip between Turkey and China... [P2, 2025, Istanbul].

The accounts of P3 and P2 reveal the deep contradiction between the AKP government's rhetoric of "brotherhood" and its practice of "security cooperation". This situation demonstrates that the form of "covert and authoritarian cooperation" mentioned in our hypothesis involves the host state's practice of both controlling the diaspora internally and using it as a pragmatic bargaining chip in foreign policy.

Concluding discussion

The participants' narratives demonstrate how a vulnerable community escaping homeland repression is instrumentalized in line with the geopolitical objectives of a host state, and how this process ultimately reproduces the sending state's repressive narratives within transnational spaces.

These findings bring together different theoretical approaches from the academic literature that examines the relationships between diasporas, authoritarian regimes, and transnational repression, introducing a new phenomenon that highlights the co-produced nature of extraterritorial repression.

Our research reveals that the Uyghur migration corridor is not merely an escape route; rather, it constitutes a tangible outcome of authoritarian regimes extending their repressive geographies beyond their borders. This corridor functions as a newly forged zone of co-produced repression, empirically grounding the argument that authoritarian power is no longer contained by sovereign frontiers (Lewis 2015). Taking the analyses that emphasize the tacit consent or active participation of host states in extraterritorial repression processes a step further, our findings reveal that Turkey, in line with its own geopolitical interests, has deliberately created a "grey area" for the Uyghur diaspora, making it vulnerable and open to instrumentalization.

In this context, Marinova's (2017) model, which examines how host states use diasporas for their own foreign policy objectives, offers a central initial framework for understanding our findings. The AKP's "rescue" operation, conducted through diplomatic channels and diaspora organizations for Uyghurs stranded in Southeast Asia, is an example of Marinova's "legitimization and platform pro-

vision policy". This "humanitarian" intervention created an area of gratitude and legitimacy over the refugees who arrived in Turkey. However, as our findings show, this initial "protective" policy rapidly evolved into a policy of instrumentalization. The systematic funnelling of extremely vulnerable refugees, who were offered no other option upon setting foot in Istanbul, to the war zones in Syria demonstrates how a host state (and its collaborating diaspora organizations) can exploit the vulnerability of a diaspora community for its own geopolitical objectives.

The channeling of Uyghur refugees' nationalist motivations, such as "saving the homeland" and "receiving armed training", toward a conflict in Syria through the implicit guidance of diaspora organizations and the AKP government apparatus proves how patriotic sentiments can be converted into a geopolitical tool. Contrary to the narrative of "distant warriors" fighting for their homeland (Orjuela 2008), the Uyghurs in this study are transformed into the host state's proxy warriors with the hope of one day returning to their homeland as warriors. Our findings align with frameworks suggesting that authoritarian states flexibly categorize diasporas according to their own interests (Glasius 2018). While the AKP government initially included Uyghurs in the category of a "kin community", it used them as proxy warriors for its interests in Syria and ultimately reproduced China's "terrorism" narrative against the Uyghurs in the international arena.

Ultimately, this research reveals, through the experiences of Uyghur refugees, the vulnerability of diasporas caught between global power struggles, the extraterritorial practices of authoritarian regimes, and the pragmatic foreign policy objectives of host states. Our findings show that extraterritorial repression and diaspora governance are not merely a bilateral relationship between the sending and host states; rather, it is a process that is reproduced and negotiated in "third" spaces (in this case, Syria) where the interests of these two actors intersect. This shows us how transnational spaces can be reproduced both through state intervention and through diaspora organisations. The Uyghur case is a tragic testament to how a diaspora can experience a compounded precarity at the intersection of the authoritarian practices of both its homeland and host state, and how even its struggle for survival can be turned into geopolitical capital. This situation once again reveals that the role of the host state and the dynamics of inter-authoritarian cooperation cannot be overlooked in the analysis of diaspora politics.

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