

Testimony of Jewher Ilham
before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China
April 8, 2014

My name is Jewher Ilham and I am grateful to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for giving me this opportunity to appear here and to speak to this committee about the suppression of dissent in the People's Republic of China as I have personally experienced it. I am currently enrolled as a student in the Intensive English Program at Indiana University and hope to matriculate into a degree program when I finish. This was not what I expected would happen to me over a year ago when I first set out to accompany my father, Ilham Tohti, to the U.S. where he was to take up a position as a visiting scholar at Indiana University in February, 2013. I was to stay for a month, helping my father set up his living arrangements; my father was to stay for a year.

My father, Ilham Tohti, is a well-known economist and writer based at Central Minzu University in Beijing, and an advocate for the human rights of the Uyghur people. Although I am Uyghur, I am not an academic expert on Xinjiang, nor an expert on Chinese politics. But I have been able to observe the impact and results of repressive Chinese policies as they have been applied to my father, his work, his students, and his family.

On February 2, 2013, after we arrived at the airport in Beijing and were checking in for our flight to the U.S., we were pulled out of line and taken away. When a bureaucratic error led to my being given the choice of continuing the boarding process and flying to the U.S. My father insisted that I continue the trip alone. He was detained, beaten, questioned and forbidden from leaving China. What were his crimes? On his website, *Uyghur Online*, and via other social media, he had written widely, about the abuses of basic human rights that are visited on the Uyghur people and that abridge their intellectual and religious freedoms. These policies, at their most egregious, leave them feeling like a people under occupation.

2013 was not the first time my father had been detained by the authorities, nor the first time that he and other members of our family had been subjected to harassment. The government was particularly enraged at the work my father did after serious clashes in Xinjiang in 2009 left many people dead and a significant number "disappeared." My father worked to get the names of these people out and to cast a spotlight on the lack of due process that was a large part of China's method of repressing Uyghur grievances. As a result of this work my family was removed from their residence and moved around for one month, our phones and computers confiscated.

This became familiar. In April 2011, my father and grandmother were sent to Guangzhou for a week. I stayed in Beijing with my mother (my parents are divorced). In December, I returned home from school one day and without forewarning found an empty home: my stepmother, my father and my brothers had been sent to Hainan for two weeks. On my own I made my way to my mother's home.

In 2012 the authorities confiscated my five-year-old brother's residence book, thus blocking him from registering for school or having a passport. The university authorities also cancelled my father's classes for one semester without any explicit cause. Over the years too, *Uyghur Online* has been periodically shut down by the government.

In the fall of 2013 State Security personnel rammed my father's car when he was en route to the airport to pick up his mother, who was flying to Beijing from Urumqi. When he got out of his car the State Security people told him they would kill everyone in our family.

But the worst was what happened on and after January 15 of this year, the last day that any of our family saw my father. On that day 30 or 40 police from different offices came to our house and took my father away, confiscating documents, telephones, computers, and even our family safe. All this was done without any due process or requisite formalities. For days we had no information about his whereabouts; his lawyer was not allowed any contact with him. Then, on January 25, the Urumqi Public Security Bureau announced a slew of accusations against him, including inciting separatism and hatred of the country, as well as praising terrorists. Anyone who knows my father realizes how utterly false these charges are. One prominent Chinese intellectual has noted that my father is one of the few Uyghurs intellectuals and dissidents who, to his knowledge, does not favor separatism. My father never speaks about separatism; in fact he is exactly the sort of person a rational Chinese political structure would seek to engage with in order to address the conditions of the Uyghur people. Instead, by arresting my father and threatening him with charges that carry the severest of penalties it has driven many Uyghurs to a point at which they can't even imagine that their wholly justified grievances can get any sort of a hearing under Chinese rule. Today, we know that my father is being held in the Urumqi Municipal Prison. But no one can visit him.

The punishment of this honest, outspoken dissident doesn't stop here. The Chinese state doesn't just punish (justly or unjustly) an individual political prisoner. It often metes out a collective punishment to the prisoner's family. My stepmother has no access to family funds that legally belong to her because my father's bank account has been frozen. He has been the primary breadwinner for the family. She and my young brothers (ages 4 and 7) are monitored 24 hours a day by anywhere from 2-8 people; police sleep outside their door at night and keep watch there during the day.

Phone calls to my stepmother are monitored, making it difficult for her to communicate with me and with other people. In addition, the position that my stepmother has at Minzu University was always renewed periodically. But now we are seriously worried that when her current contract expires in May she may well lose her position due to my father's political imprisonment.

My brothers are also suffering gravely from this. The oldest, who is more aware than his brother as to what has happened, has become withdrawn and introverted. Having witnessed our father being taken away, he now has nightmares.

Finally, there are some students of my father. I am proud to say that my father was widely admired by his students, many of whom saw his work as vital and necessary. And now several of them too have been arrested and imprisoned, with very little known as to their whereabouts.

I mention these last facts to give you an idea of the kind of collective punishment that the arrest of dissidents entails. But the core matter here is that China has imprisoned a dissident intellectual whose sole “crime,” in spite of the trumped up charges that are being thrown around, was simply advocating human rights and equitable treatment for the Uyghur people. I am heartened that the Congressional-Executive Commission on China has taken an interest in my father’s case and is seeking to learn more about the facts of his imprisonment.

I thank you for allowing me to speak to you today.