

CONTROL OF RELIGION IN CHINA THROUGH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

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CONTROL OF RELIGION IN CHINA THROUGH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2022

CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE
COMMISSION ON CHINA,
Washington, DC.

The hearing was held from 10:00 a.m. to 11:43 a.m., via video-conference, Senator Jeff Merkley, Chair, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, presiding.

Also present: Representative James P. McGovern, Co-chair, Senator Ossoff, and Representatives Smith and Hartzler.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JEFF MERKLEY, A U.S. SENATOR FROM OREGON; CHAIR, CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA

Chair MERKLEY. Good morning. Today's hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China entitled "Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism" will come to order.

Before we turn to the subject of this hearing, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank President Biden for his recent appointment of five executive branch commissioners to this Commission. This marks the first time in nearly six years that the Commission includes executive branch commissioners. Their appointment will bolster our ability to bring the expertise and perspective of the various branches of government to our work monitoring human rights and the rule of law in China. As we develop recommendations for legislative, executive, and international action, dialogue to coordinate our efforts will be critical, as it has been in recent years, in implementing legislation spearheaded by this Commission, such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, and more.

I look forward to working closely with our new commissioners. Those commissioners are Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink, Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Marisa Lago, Under Secretary of Labor for International Affairs Thea Lee, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Lisa Peterson, and Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya. Welcome to our new commissioners. We are absolutely delighted to have you.

Today our hearing focuses on freedom of religion, particularly recent developments in Chinese authorities' use of technology to crack down on the free exercise of religion. While many of our hear-

ings explore violations of religious freedom—in Xinjiang, Tibet, and elsewhere—this is our first hearing dedicated to this topic since 2018. Recent Chinese Communist Party steps to use digital repression to strengthen control of religion make this an especially timely hearing. As more religious activity and resources move online, especially in response to COVID, Chinese officials have expanded their use of digital tools to surveil and suppress online religious expression. Invasive surveillance technologies and mass biometric data collection track and monitor religious groups that authorities deem to be a threat.

In March of this year, new measures for the administration of internet religious information services went into effect, which require a government-issued permit to post religious content online and which ban the online broadcasting of religious ceremonies, rites, and services, among a host of other restrictions infringing on Chinese citizens' freedom of religion. These measures control how individuals and communities worship, with the aim of sinicizing religion to conform with Party priorities. As we will hear today, those priorities are political and social control. To achieve that control, Chinese authorities cite objectives like combating crime and countering so-called religious extremism as they undermine fundamental human rights. The recent UN High Commissioner for Human Rights report on Xinjiang calls this what it is, a pretext that conflates personal religious choice with extremism and leads to severe human rights abuses.

Our first witness today is one of the most powerful voices in the world when it comes to exposing these abuses and advocating for those who simply wish to exercise their basic rights. I'm honored that Nury Turkel is here with us. After we hear his perspective, our second panel of eminent experts will help us understand the tools of digital surveillance and repression, the risks of this model of authoritarian management of religion spreading to other countries, and recommendations for how defenders of religious freedom can respond. I look forward to our witnesses' testimony.

I'd now like to recognize my co-chair, Congressman McGovern, for his opening remarks.

STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES P. MCGOVERN, A U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM MASSACHUSETTS; CO-CHAIR, CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to our witnesses. Religious freedom has been at the core of the Commission's work since its founding, and I appreciate your scheduling this hearing on this important topic. The Chinese government's record on religious freedom is as atrocious as it is well documented, including by this Commission and by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, whose chair we're honored to have as a witness today. In our thoughts today are the prisoners of conscience who have had their religious liberty violated by the Chinese government. It is our moral responsibility to help them tell their stories and those of the people whose voices do not reach us.

Today's hearing will focus on new and insidious methods authorities are using to exert control over religious practice, including online regulation and digital surveillance technologies. The UN spe-

cial rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief last year reported that the Chinese government reportedly uses biometrics, digital surveillance, and personal data for behavioral analysis for identifying “extremist” or “unhealthy” thought. He notes that such technologies used in the counterterrorism context threaten freedom of thought.

This aligns with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ recent report on Xinjiang, which explains how Chinese officials misused counterterrorism policy to brutally repress Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims and deny their ability to practice their religion and cultural heritage. This shows how the right to freedom of religion intersects with other fundamental rights—the freedoms of speech and association, equal protection, due process, presumption of innocence—all of which are protected under international human rights law.

In this light, I hope the witnesses will expand on the meaning of sinicization of religion—a process to coerce religious believers’ allegiance to the state and the Party. We also want to understand how sinicization manipulates the teaching of religious principles to imply that they support the Party’s ideology. It appears that the Party is exploiting religion as a means to impose social control.

Last month, a group of UN experts, including the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, issued a statement against the cynical abuse of religion or belief as a tool of discrimination, hostility, and violence, and noted that international law rejects any attempt to use religion or belief as justification for the destruction of the rights and freedoms of others. USCIRF (the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom) shows that the United States seeks to be a leader in promoting international religious freedom. To be effective, however, we must live up to the standards we demand of other countries. We lack credibility in criticizing China for using religion as a pretext to restrict other liberties if our own government, including at the state level, engages in the same behavior.

Two final points. One, while China officially only recognizes five religions, our analysis and advocacy must recognize that there is a stunningly wide array of religious belief in the country. PRC regulation not only harms religious freedom but its diversity, too. Lastly, as China suffers from a devastating heat wave, I am interested in how restrictions on religion undermine the cause of environmental protection, given the links between spirituality and nature within Buddhism and Daoism, for example. Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to the testimony.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Congressman McGovern.

Congressman Smith, did you wish to make some opening remarks?

**STATEMENT OF HON. CHRIS SMITH,
A U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM NEW JERSEY**

Representative SMITH. Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank you for organizing this very important hearing on an extremely important topic. Digital authoritarianism perhaps is too benign a phrase for what we are seeing take place today in Xi Jinping’s China. Rather, it’s digital totalitarianism or techno-

totalitarianism, if you prefer the alliteration, for nothing more clearly illustrates the fundamental distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism than this attempt by Xi Jinping to dictate the beliefs of one's innermost conscience and how one forms the very thoughts to lift up in prayer to God.

Xi Jinping dictates, in effect, the totality of society, for there is nothing beyond the Communist Party decrees. This is not simply authoritarianism, but a dictator that lets the priest or preacher think of things of God and theology, though once he steps out into the political realm in criticizing the government he is subjected to arrest and silencing. Rather, we see under Xi Jinping the sinicization of the very content of belief, the rewriting of the words of scripture—be it the Bible, Sutra, or Koran—to conform with Xi Jinping Thought.

Indeed, one need only go back to the era of Mao Zedong and the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution to find anything remotely comparable. While Mao particularly hated religions deemed foreign, in reality he waged a war against anything that smacked of the four olds: old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits. Ironically, the result of Mao's bringing the entirety of Chinese society to its knees was a loss of faith in the Communist Party, which subsequent economic growth and prosperity could never fully restore; plus the growth of religious belief and revivalism that we see manifested among the Chinese people today, which Xi Jinping now seeks to further control.

In so doing, Xi is able to draw upon technology, the likes of which the Mao Zedongs could only dream of, from artificial intelligence, to tracking apps, which bring us closer than ever before to the nightmare envisioned by George Orwell. Again, this totalitarianism is not simply authoritarianism. In 2018, I wrote an op-ed for the Washington Post entitled "The World Must Stand against China's War on Religion." In it I stated, "The ruling Chinese Communist Party has undertaken the most comprehensive attempt to manipulate and control or destroy religious communities since Mao made the eradication of religion a goal of his disastrous Cultural Revolution half a century ago. Now Xi, apparently fearing the power of independent religious belief as a challenge to the Communist Party's legitimacy, is trying to radically transform religion into the Party's servant, employing a draconian policy known as sinicization."

That was in 2018, when the Party was implementing a five-year plan to bend religion to the goal of building a socialist society, as we've seen in documents such as the online outline of the five-year working plan for promoting the sinicization of Christianity. That's their plan. That document contains principles which are applied broadly to all religious believers and must be observed, such as: "embrace and support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, be guided by the core values of socialism, and endorse the system, ways, theories, and culture of our country's development, integrate outstanding Chinese traditional culture with advanced socialist culture."

Five years from 2018 brings us to today. Since then, the repression has only gotten worse, with the Chinese Communist Party under Xi exercising greater control over the content of religious

education and the content of scripture, while extending his grip geographically to the once-free bastion of Hong Kong, where even the towering giant of religious freedom, Cardinal Zen, was arrested in May of this year, and his trial is scheduled to begin next week. I pause here to call upon Pope Francis to speak out with clarity and conviction on behalf of Cardinal Zen and the persecuted church in Hong Kong and China. With that, again, I look forward to our witnesses and yield back to you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, again, for the hearing.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Congressman Smith.

I'd now like to turn to the witness for our first panel, Nury Turkel. He is the chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Mr. Turkel was born in a reeducation camp, spending the first several months of his life in detention with his mother. He came to the United States in 1995 and was later granted asylum. A lawyer, a foreign policy expert, and a human rights advocate, he serves as the chair of the board for the Uyghur Human Rights Project and as senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. Previously he served as the president of the Uyghur American Association. Mr. Turkel, the floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF NURY TURKEL, CHAIR OF THE
U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

Mr. TURKEL. Good morning, Chairman Merkley, Co-chair McGovern, and honorable members of the Commission. Thank you very much for inviting me to testify on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I appreciate your steadfast leadership and continuing attention to the Chinese government's assault on religious freedom, targeting many ethnic and religious communities across China, including Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, underground Catholic and Protestant house church Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners, just to name a few.

For decades, the ruling Communist Party has placed religion under tight, comprehensive, and coercive control. It exercises control by using arbitrary laws and regulations, implementing them through a complex but sophisticated web of Party and government agencies at all levels, including the CCP's infamous United Front Work Department, State Administration for Religious Affairs, and China's public security and state security apparatus. Anyone suspected of violating the CCP's religious policies is severely punished. China's egregious abuse against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims is a case in point that the United States Government rightfully has formally recognized as genocide and crimes against humanity. Even the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' report on Xinjiang confirmed that severe violations have occurred and may amount to crimes against humanity.

The crackdown on religion has become increasingly harsh in recent years under the brutal rule of CCP leader Xi Jinping, leading some experts to call his decade-long reign a bitter winter for religious freedom in China. Xi Jinping's new regulation on religion, the Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services, represent a new low for Xi and his government. Its impact cannot be overstated, as the regulation imposes new restric-

tions on religious activities, further constricting the narrow space in which religious groups can operate.

This new regulation has particularly significant and adverse effects on independent, unregistered religious communities. Because of the government's severe persecution, many of them rely on online platforms and resources for religious education, training, religious gatherings and worship, and other religious activities. These online platforms and smartphone apps are often the only viable means through which these religious communities can carry out activities and connect with one another, especially during the strict COV-19 lockdown.

The negative impact of this regulation is already being felt across China, since it went into effect in March 2022. Chinese authorities have recruited hundreds, if not thousands, of auditors to target and censor religious content on the internet. Christian and Tibetan Buddhist groups have reported that their websites and WeChat virtual groups were shut down and are no longer accessible. USCIRF is concerned that this regulation will lead to more persecution and abuses, especially for groups with foreign connections.

Regulations also impose tighter restrictions on state-sanctioned religious groups. These groups are required to submit detailed information to authorities to apply for a permit to operate online. In addition, they are required to self-censor their religious material on the internet. Therefore, even state-sanctioned religious groups are not safe and could be punished if they are found to be non-compliant with government policies.

We are all aware of the Chinese government routinely monitoring actions and censoring all kinds of online content, including religious materials. But this new regulation is the first of its kind designed to specifically target religious content on the internet, and it has created a chilling effect on many religious groups and individuals. It is tantamount to a total ban on religious activity, as many groups are no longer able to operate in person or online.

The order to cleanse the internet of any exposure to religion came from the highest echelon of the Party, Xi Jinping himself. At the 2016 National Conference on Religious Work, attended by high-level Party and government officials, Xi Jinping expressed particular displeasure toward the phenomenon of internet religions. Five years later at the 2021 National Conference on Religious Work, Xi again emphasized the need to strengthen the management of religious affairs on the internet.

It is important to note that Xi Jinping sees religion as fundamentally connected to national security. As a consequence, he has underscored the need to fight against foreign infiltration through the use of religion and religious extremism, including the internet. This new regulation is an integral part of the CCP's sinicization policy to subjugate and control all ethnic and religious groups, coercing support and loyalty to the CCP's rule and its policies, or else facing severe consequences.

Mr. Chairman, this new regulation is the latest example of the CCP expanding and refining its techno-authoritarianism toolkit at home. It tries to intimidate and coerce its citizens to perpetuate its rule. Ethnic minority regions, Tibet and Xinjiang in particular, have borne the brunt of the CCP's technology-enhanced brutality in

recent years, as this Commission has well documented. The CCP has been exporting its techno-authoritarianism overseas to countries with poor human rights records as well.

Oppressive regimes can emulate the Chinese model to persecute political dissidents and human rights advocates. The United States Government and companies must continue to ensure that critical technology is not exported to China nor contributing to any religious freedom abuses abroad. USCIRF also recommends that the United States Government impose more targeted sanctions on Chinese officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations, especially those within the United Front Work Department, the State Administration for Religious Affairs, as well as China's public security and state security apparatus. These entities are directly involved in drafting, implementation, and enforcement of the new regulation on internet religious activities.

In closing, I would like to thank the Commission again for the opportunity to testify and for your attention to the plight of all persecuted ethnic and religious groups in China. I look forward to your questions.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much for your testimony.

We'll now have a round of questions from members of the Commission who are with us. I believe we're allocating seven minutes to each member, and I'll encourage people to wrap up their remarks if they're hitting that boundary.

I'll begin, Mr. Turkel, by noting that you have been a target of the Chinese government's intimidation and threats, as have many other Uyghurs and others globally. As this transnational repression targets Uyghurs and Hong Kongers and Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners, human rights advocates, journalists, and others outside of China's borders, what should the United States do to address this problem?

Mr. TURKEL. Chairman, thank you very much for bringing up my own experience, at least in the past decade or so. I came to the United States, as you noted, in 1995. Now I'm an American citizen—a U.S. official—and the Chinese government is retaliating against me and my family for my service in the U.S. Government and for advocating for a strong human rights policy through my professional work and personal advocacy.

Last December I was sanctioned by Xi Jinping's China, and this May I was also sanctioned by Putin's Russia, so two of the world's worst human rights abusers have sanctioned me. The consequences of my being sanctioned are very, very serious. I still have my mother, whom I have not seen since 2004, living in communist China. The last time I saw her was when she was here with my late father for my law school graduation, and I don't even know if I will see her again. The Chinese—this is a hostage-taking. This is direct retaliation against a U.S. official. And this is retaliation against an American citizen who's exercising his freedom of speech in the United States.

I am grateful that you and other Members of Congress have been paying attention to this, but we need to have a clear policy that includes a legislative mandate. As far as I know, there are no legal tools available to go after those individuals engaging in transnational repression. I do believe that there is good will within

our government, but we need clear guidance. I think Congress can play a significant role.

Also, I would like to see law enforcement act a little bit more coherently, even aggressively. The FBI put out a bulletin, which was very, very helpful, but at the same time, I'm sensing that the Uyghur American community feels a little hopeless that the U.S. Government role, and even the law enforcement role, that are clearly described and mandated in the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, have not been done. Also, our government needs to understand what transnational repression entails. That could be done through an annual human rights report. That could be done through public education. That could be done through hearings like this.

Then finally, I'd like to see the officials responsible for designing and carrying out transnational repression, whether it be in Tehran, whether it be in Moscow, whether it be elsewhere, or Beijing, face consequences. They should not be allowed to come to the United States, and our allies in liberal democracies should consider similar measures. Why would they stop this kind of behavior if they don't face consequences? It's quite simple, so we need to act on this societally, governmentally, and also in tandem with our partners and allies who value human rights, who value freedom of speech, who value religious freedom.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you for your response. I'm going to keep raising the issue of transnational repression. We're often thinking about the human rights issues inside other countries, and certainly that's our role as a Commission in terms of what's happening inside China, but we also have to realize what China is doing outside of China, and inside the United States, in violating the human rights of those resident here.

Let me turn back to what's happening inside of China. In your testimony you note the connection Xi Jinping draws between the management of religion and national security. As I noted in my opening remarks, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called this linkage a pretext for serious human rights violations in Xinjiang. What more can be done so the Chinese government and other governments cannot hide behind this so-called counterterrorism or counterextremism strategy to flout binding international human rights laws in regard to religion?

Mr. TURKEL. Thank you, Chairman, for that excellent question. Since 2014, the Chinese government, through its national security strategy, clearly stated that the freedom that we treasure, that they cannot stand, is part of their national security concern. They're constantly battling against "Western" influence or "foreign" influence. To the CCP, even though religious freedom is something constitutionally guaranteed with specific language, such as you can be a certain religious faith, the Party has never allowed its citizens to practice; that's only on paper.

On national security concerns, the convenience the Chinese find in, in particular, the Uyghur religion is the fact that it can be easily linked to counterterrorism or the fight against three forces, as they often say. Fight against extremism—religious extremism, separatism, and terrorism. Even to this day, after the UN recognized that there are crimes against humanity underway, the Chinese top

diplomats in Washington, Beijing, and Geneva are still repeating those same lines.

They may also underestimate the intelligence of the people in the free world, that they can tell that this is not the type of counterterrorism that the United States government sees, or that our European allies see. Secretary Blinken said it very clearly in his “60 Minutes” interview, that the United States does not believe that the U.S. and China are fighting the same type of terrorism. The Chinese can say this 15 times more, but it does not hold any water.

Here’s the important aspect of what they’re trying to do. This is all about preemptive policing. That religious belief is now linked to national security is a cancerous tumor. It needs to be cut out or killed with a spray of chemicals. This is a part of their public remarks. The CCP, for example, likens Uyghur Islam to mental illness, and claims that followers are abnormal and therefore, as former Chinese Ambassador to Washington Cui Tiankai said, those people need to go through thought transformation to be normalized. He said this on CNN to the American people. Those tumors, those thought viruses, to the Chinese government are a national security concern that need to be taken out before they metastasize and spread to vital organs.

And what do we do? I don’t think that the United States Government treats religious freedom—human rights—as a national security concern. We always deal with it once it turns into a humanitarian crisis, genocide, war crimes. It becomes a very costly operation. I’d like to see our government in its overall foreign policy agenda, as initially intended, to put in place the International Religious Freedom Act. We need to make an integral part of our national security agenda—specifically in our foreign policy engagements—diplomatic engagement with a government that has a dismal human rights and religious freedom record.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much for your insight and use of your role on the Commission on International Religious Freedom to be such a powerful voice for religious freedom in the world.

Congressman and Co-chair McGovern.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Turkel. Next month, the Sino-Vatican Agreement is up for renewal, and last week Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin expressed confidence that the agreement would be renewed, saying “When you negotiate with someone you must always start from recognizing their good faith.” Really? I mean, I certainly would not have made a statement like that. Let me ask you, what is your assessment of the state of Catholics in China today? Are they subject to the same level of sinicization as other religions? And as Mr. Smith pointed out in his opening statement, Cardinal Zen goes on trial next month in Hong Kong. Do you think that Vatican authorities have done enough to defend him?

Mr. TURKEL. We have been publicly expressing concern over the silence at the Vatican with respect to persecuted Catholics in Hong Kong and in mainland China. I think that the constant Chinese battle against Western influence, by and large, includes the Christian Catholics in China. To the Chinese government, the concept of foreign religion essentially entails Uyghur Muslims and the Christian Catholic community in China. Now they’ve tested it out. It

worked, and essentially no one paid a price for it within the Chinese leadership, with the mildest of criticism around the world. Thank God we live in a country that's shown leadership in this effort.

The cause has not been serious enough to the CCP leadership, and the Catholic community in China does not have the type of voice that they should have in this kind of discussion. I worry that the same method being implemented in the Uyghur homeland, without many consequences, now will be implemented in the Christian community. We're already seeing signs of similar practices, removing crosses from the top of the churches in China and also putting up Xi Jinping's pictures on the walls inside the places of worship. In the case of the Uyghurs, it's a no-go. You don't look at images to practice your religion.

So now with the sinicization effort, they're rewriting the Bible, rewriting the Koran to make it communist ideology as a religion. Communism is not a religion. It may be a religion for Xi Jinping and his cohorts, but it's not a religion. Abrahamic religion and communism are incompatible. This is a destructive effort, and I will have to repeat this I don't know how many times: What is the cost that the CCP leadership has suffered?

Yes, we have imposed sanctions. It has been a long proposition. The United States has shown leadership. Where are the European allies? Where are the other liberal democracies who believe in human rights, who believe in religious freedom? Unless this becomes a collaborative global effort and we impose serious costs on the CCP leadership, they will continue this with impunity.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you. I appreciate your response.

Mr. Turkel, you know, Tibetan Buddhists value the preservation of the natural environment as an integral part of their spiritual belief system, as we hear often from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This is true of others, including Chinese Buddhists, Daoists, and folk religion practitioners. Should we look at environmental destruction, including that wrought by climate change, as impinging on the religious freedom of these faith traditions?

Mr. TURKEL. Both the Tibetan Plateau and the Uyghur homeland, which some people describe as the Taklamakan Desert, have been earlier targets for the CCP's environmental destruction, degradation efforts. In the case of Xinjiang, for example, they've been testing nuclear weapons since the 1960s. They still use dirty coal to make polysilicon. In the case of the Tibetans, they've been destroying forests, and there's serious water pollution in the Tibetan area. Also the Chinese government's attempts at moving people from inland Chinese cities are creating pressure on local people's lives that could be as simple as jobs, as simple as the resources.

In the case of the Tibetans, I believe that the Tibetan people have in recent years not been talked about enough, as has been the case in the past. I think we need to start paying attention. I worry that the Chinese are trying to buy time, waiting until the Dalai Lama's time expires. That will be a disastrous circumstance and situation, both inside and outside of Tibet. We still don't know the whereabouts of the Panchen Lama, and this should concern us. So this all, again, just boils down to the CCP's fear of religion.

Actually, this has been scientifically proven: In a society where the government respects religious freedom, that naturally brings stability. That naturally makes the society prosperous. So the Chinese, instead of spending billions of dollars on domestic security, scaring its own population or being fearful of their own population, and engaging in destructive efforts to destroy this proud Tibetan nation, the Uyghur nation, the Catholics, and others—they should be leaving people alone, letting them live the life they want to live.

I think in the long term, the Chinese Communist Party has not only been disastrous for worldwide rights concerns, but is also creating a long-lasting effect on the psyche, on the social health of Chinese society.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. All right. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I'll yield back my remaining time.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you.

Congressman Smith.

Representative SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, to Chairman Turkel, thank you for your extraordinary leadership, your courage, and the fact that you have family members, your mom, who are at grave risk from the Chinese Communist Party, and yet you speak with such clarity and such precision and courage. I can't thank you enough for that leadership. To have you walking point is a blessing to the Commission on International Religious Freedom, so thank you again for that leadership.

To the point on the Vatican agreement, when I was chairman of this Commission, I did travel over to the Vatican. I asked Cardinal Parolin, the secretary of state, not to engage in that agreement, not to agree to giving Xi Jinping veto power over bishops, which I think is absurd and completely undermines the underground Catholic church. I have met many members of that church in-country, including Bishop Su of Baoding province who was out of prison and went back to prison, spent more than almost 40 years, no one knows for sure how many because he may have died since. The underground Catholic church has been hurt severely by this.

I also think it has a chilling effect on the church's voice in speaking out for the Uyghurs, and speaking out for the Tibetan Buddhists, for the Protestants. The solidarity with all those persecuted faiths, Falun Gong, does not have the same articulation that it would otherwise have. I do hope that the church will reconsider its position very seriously. Let me also say, in response to the Chairman's question—it was a good one—what do we do now? I would respectfully say that it's time. You know, we do have Magnitsky sanctions, and we are trying to hold those most responsible for their egregious behavior to account.

In March, I introduced H.R. 7193, the China Trade Relations Act of 2022, that would reestablish human rights linkage to our MFN, to our trade relationship, with China. This is not a partisan dig, but on May 26, 1994, Bill Clinton delinked most favored nation status from human rights. I believe very, very passionately that that's when the Chinese Communist Party said: "They just care about profits." You know, the balance of trade last year was well over \$350 billion. They are an export economy.

If we had human rights linkage that was serious and said that unless there's serious sustained progress on human rights—and of

course, religious freedom is at the core of all of this—there would be amelioration of their policy, and I think reform. When they think we're bluffing and we just talk and don't have any linkage to trade, I think we lose an opportunity to protect the sanctity of religion, of all the religions and religious practices in China. So Mr. Chairman, you might want to speak to this, Mr. Turkel, if you'd like. But I do think we need to get even more serious about this.

Had we had it since 1994, I do think that reformers of some kind would have made sure that this exporting economy called China would have made systemic changes in their barbaric practices, especially their persecution of religious freedom. So, Chairman Turkel, if you want to speak to that I would appreciate it. And if not, I understand. But I do think we have to get even more serious. I mean, China has so exploited the trade relationship and has brought to their shore dual-use items that now have transformed them into a superpower. Even on the military side alone, we have sold them the rope that they someday hope to hang us with.

So if you could, Mr. Turkel.

Mr. TURKEL. Yes. Thank you. Thank you so much. Definitely. We have a lot to do. I need to use this time to bring up something that supports your ideas, which is that last December most people in the United States, around the world, noticed something very significant. The United States Government, the Biden administration, sanctioned—they added the Chinese Military Medical Academy and its 11 affiliates to the Commerce Department's Entity List—which is an export ban list, as you know—for developing brain-control weaponry to be used on ethno-religious groups, especially the Uyghurs.

This just didn't catch much attention. I think this kind of focused, targeted sanctioning, Entity Listing, needs to continue to happen. Why would the Chinese government develop brain-control weaponry to be used? Again, to the earlier point, they used to control the behavior of the Uyghur people, of religious communities, but now they want to control their bodies. This weaponry essentially controls the communication between your body and your brain. People need to look at it. This is the type of regime that should come across as disturbing, alarming news to all of us.

As we know, technology and economic development are supposed to foster freedom and improve our lives. But Chinese progress—though some people make flattering statements on TV or in their academic papers, specifically on China's science and technology and economic development—is not moral progress. Chinese technology has been enabling and facilitating collective punishment and enslavement of vulnerable populations.

Now Chinese surveillance, this technology, has become part of ordinary people's lives. It's in their homes. They have QR codes on their doors. It's in the places of worship—in churches, mosques, temples. Everything, every aspect of the people within communist China, is subject to this level of persuasive and sophisticated surveillance and we've got to do something about it.

The one thing I have in mind that I think Congress should consider is putting in place something like the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA). In the 1970s when this law was enacted, it was not really known to most people. It has become a very effective tool

around the world today. The U.K. has similar measures. And now, instead of going to foreign countries, playing by their rules, we're exporting good corporate practices. The entire global business community follows the FCPA.

We need to have something like that when it comes to tech authoritarianism, digital surveillance. This is a serious problem. This is about our future. If we don't stop this, if we don't blunt this, this will become a serious problem, create enormous challenges to civil liberties and religious freedom, even the democratic process, as simple as some dictatorship or authoritarian regime monitoring voting records, monitoring the opposition party's activities. That is a real threat to democracy, at a bare minimum.

Representative SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you. I yield back.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you, Congressman Smith.

And now we're going to turn to the Senate side. Senator Ossoff. Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Chair Turkel, for your service and your testimony today. I led a delegation to India about a week and a half ago and had the opportunity in Dharamshala to meet with leaders of the CTA (Central Tibetan Administration) and Tibetan government-in-exile. How would you characterize, based upon your knowledge and understanding, the CCP's use of digital technology for purposes of repression and control in Tibet?

Mr. TURKEL. Thank you, Senator. We've been hearing this and reading about it—this is an erroneous statement, actually, that the surveillance technology has been developed and tested on the Uyghurs, and now it's spreading. Actually, it's the other way around. It initially started in mainland China, where this person that the United States Government sanctioned, Chen Quanguo, was the Communist Party chief in Tibet. It was initially implemented in Tibet. It was very successful, and he got promoted by Xi Jinping in August 2016.

He took his apparatus, his team, his security detail, over to Urumqi, set up this command center in an old hotel. This was profiled in *The New Yorker*. The Tibetan people actually were affected by this early on, but we failed to pay attention. We failed to detect the early warning signs and then it becomes a much bigger operation when Chen Quanguo took the same practice over to Urumqi. He was given resources. He was given authority, even a seat in the Politburo. That essentially paved the way for today's Uyghur nightmare.

The Tibetan people have not only been subjected to that. As I noted earlier, they have been pretty much forgotten. We need to pay attention to them. They are also facing an existential threat. They are also facing a serious political threat, stemming from Beijing. They're also facing a serious leadership threat, because the Panchen Lama is still in Chinese custody, has been disappeared. First things first, we have to implement the existing laws designed to protect the Tibetan people's rights.

I'm glad that we have an Under Secretary of State who is the special coordinator for Tibet. As somebody who knows the Tibetan leadership and Tibetan community, in previous years I was so frustrated that our government did not even open its doors—Lobsang

Sangay, for example, former president of the Central Tibetan Administration, was not even allowed to enter the White House, could not even enter the State Department. Our officials ended up going to the hotel to meet with him.

I mean, the laws are put in place to follow. We have to implement the laws with respect to the Uyghurs, the Hong Kongers, and Tibetans. Otherwise, it's meaningless effort. First things first, we have to go back to the way that we treated Tibetan issues a decade or so ago, with seriousness. I know that we have not been able to make the progress that we want to see, but we have not been persistent in our efforts.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Chairman Turkel. I'd like to ask you as well how you have observed and understood the same technologies, techniques, and tools that have been used to surveil and repress religious minorities also being used to target journalists.

Mr. TURKEL. I can't emphasize enough the sophistication of Chinese surveillance. Unlike our government, and unlike other governments, the Chinese have no resources problem. They have been pouring in zillions of dollars into R&D and also control of those tech companies. The journalists have been surveilled, kicked out, but a couple of years ago they started coming back. For a long time, the Washington Post did not have even a single reporter, until recently, in China.

Again, the Chinese want to hide their crimes. The Chinese want to continue to confuse the international community. The Chinese government wants to continue to engage in disinformation because journalists, specifically Western journalists, could do investigative journalism. They can try to get to the bottom of it. This attack on Western journalists started when Wen Jiabao was the prime minister. Melissa Chan, the former Al Jazeera journalist, was one of the first ones kicked out of China. She was just doing her job. The Chinese could not stand her, and this practice is still continuing.

Are we doing the same thing with their reporters? Is social media doing the same thing? For example, today a guy from the Global Times put out inflammatory, offensive statements on social media. And this Twitter tolerates, whereas our journalists could not even go there to report. This needs to be addressed at the highest levels.

One other thing that I need to point out is the surveillance of journalists and surveillance of ordinary citizens. Chinese high-tech firms are essentially state entities. They are SOEs, state-owned enterprises. As reported and written in several books recently, the Chinese government has a number of red phones. This was also profiled in a book that I wrote about. A German scholar—a German journalist, Kai Strittmatter, has a book called *We Have Been Harmonized*. It describes how every single Chinese high-tech CEO's desk has a red phone directly connected to the leadership, so the leadership in the CCP apparatus controls high tech. If the CCP does not like any journalist, any citizen, any entity, or even foreign officials, they can order them to do things that serve their interest, so this is an intertwined, interactive system, and I don't think, again, that we're paying enough attention.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you for your testimony and your service. I appreciate it and look forward to following up with you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Senator.

We now turn back to the House side. Congresswoman Hartzler is with us.

Representative HARTZLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Chairman Turkel, for your courageous leadership and providing us with the information that's so sorely needed. I'd like for you to expand a little bit on some of the comments you've made here just answering questions, but also on your testimony, where you talk about the CCP exporting its techno-authoritarianism overseas to other countries, and oppressive regimes emulating this China model for the treatment of political dissidents and human rights advocates. You say that our government must continue to ensure that critical technology is not exported to China and contributing to religious freedom abuses.

I wonder if you could list several examples of the countries this has been exported to and specifically what critical technology you're referring to. Are you referring to 5G technology? You've talked about Tibet a little bit, but could you just outline some of the countries where they're exporting and specifically what they're exporting, so we can be very clear and fully aware of what we need to watch for and what we need to try to stop?

Mr. TURKEL. Thank you, Congresswoman.

First of all, the equipment. Their equipment still gets support from our technology firms—software, hardware. A few years ago when Huawei was added to the Entity List, the Financial Times reported a conversation with one of the folks who worked for Huawei. This person essentially said, with this Entity List designation, our phones, our equipment just become a frame. This will be disastrous for the company. In order for this company to catch up with the technology, even with the support that they're receiving from Silicon Valley, it takes decades. So that's the reality of the Chinese high-tech industry.

I can say this—I'm not a tech person, but I can say that based on the reading that I've done, the research that I've done, Silicon Valley has been complicit. We need to look into their role. We need to eliminate the gray areas in the laws and regulations. We need to make it difficult for Silicon Valley companies to continue to find a way to get a waiver. Even companies or entities added to the Entity List or sanctioned—there is a way to go around it. There is a thing called a special license that the Office of Foreign Assets Control issues. There is a way that they can get a waiver to continue their business practices.

The other thing—we need to look at this societally, governmentally. Based on the book that I was referring to, our hospitals, our schools, our prisons, in one instance one of the military bases, even our embassy in Afghanistan—now not being used—were using Hikvision cameras. We know that this is a state-owned enterprise. This is linked to the CCP. In the United States even today, you can find Hikvision cameras. They're available. This is wrong.

Then the third thing that we need to do is talk to our European allies. This is not about the United States stopping a certain country or a company for our geopolitical interests. This is about the

future. The European community is still not on the same page as we are when it comes to these serious threats.

Finally, we need to have a judicial process, law enforcement process, to go after the businesses, the Chinese high-tech, that have a business presence in the United States. There's no international law that addresses their complicity in human rights abuses, and the genocide, for example, in China, but we do have Federal courts. Some of the Chinese companies that are present in the United States are subject to local Federal court jurisdiction. Why can't the Justice Department open an investigation, look into those companies that have a business presence here and who have been implicated in the ongoing human rights abuses? Again, laws are put in place to implement, enforce. This has to be looked at diplomatically, legislatively, and specifically in a law enforcement aspect.

Representative HARTZLER. Thank you very much. I introduced legislation to the NDAA a few years ago specifically so that Hikvision could not be sold anymore in our country—the video surveillance cameras—so I'm very interested and very concerned to hear that they're still present. I definitely will be looking into that. I know many of us here at this hearing are very concerned about that, so thank you for giving us an update on that. That's very concerning.

On another subject, though, I wanted to bring up that through the Defending Freedoms Project, I'm a congressional advocate for three Chinese Christian prisoners—Pastor John Cao, Pastor Zhang Shaojie, and Pastor Wang Yi. These brave men and their stories can be searched and read about more on the internet. But my question is, do you think that the CCP's efforts to censor and shut down certain online information pertaining to religion will have an impact on our access to the pastors' information here in the United States? How would you recommend that advocates continue to support current and future victims of religious persecution, should access to their stories be limited or removed?

Mr. TURKEL. Congresswoman, this is such an important question. Not only are we not going to be able to get access, but even a simple communication with anyone outside of the country that is perceived as hostile to the CCP has consequences. You know, they monitor our phone calls, communications, your access to certain webpages. Sorry to keep bringing up the Uyghur situation—the Uyghur phones have to be scanned by the police at the mobile police stations set up on the streets.

We don't have information as to whether this is the same practice that the Chinese have in inland China cities, but once that's already been successful in one place, it's reasonable to expect that the Chinese will transfer this over to the other provinces because, again, this is such an insecure regime that it's fearful of its own population, fearful of people of faith, people of reason who desire to be left alone. They will do this at any cost, with any justification. It's a very troubling trend.

The online databases not only in China, but outside of China, have also been subject to various attacks. Some NGO websites are regularly attacked by Chinese hackers. Now we have a new trend—I don't know if this is the case today, but when I was testifying in the summer of 2021 at a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing,

the YouTube channel had lots of disinformation on the right bar while having the hearing on the left side of the screen, so our firms, again, need to step up.

We need to be able to technologically support those who are courageous—who share information with us—so that we can assist them. We also want to find a way to protect those who have been critical in sharing information. As we noted, there are no journalists on the ground. We have to rely on those courageous people to get information. Otherwise, we will not be able to help. Even the UN report—my recently published report cites several individuals providing information and who now fear for their lives. Again, this is something that Congress could help with, and I'm afraid that without cause, without pushback, the Chinese will even do more harm to vulnerable religious and ethnic communities.

Representative HARTZLER. Very, very concerning. I sure appreciate this.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you, Congresswoman.

Thank you, Mr. Turkel, for your testimony, for your service to our country, and for your tireless advocacy for freedom of religion.

We will now turn to our second panel. I'll invite the witnesses for our second panel to turn on their videos. I'll give them an introduction and we'll dive in.

Let's start with Karrie Koesel, an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, who specializes in the study of contemporary Chinese and Russian politics, authoritarianism, and religion in politics. She is the author of *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict and the Consequences*. She is also the co-editor of *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*. I'd like to note that she previously taught at the University of Oregon.

Chris Meserole is research director of the Brookings Institution's Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology Initiative, and a Fellow at the Brookings Foreign Policy program. His research is focused currently on the increasing exploitation of digital technology by authoritarian regimes and violent non-state actors. He's the co-author of a report on how Russia and China are exporting digital authoritarianism and has testified before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on the digital repression of religious minorities in China.

Emile Dirks is a postdoctoral fellow at Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on the policing of so-called target people, Chinese citizens whom the Ministry of Public Security views as threats to social stability and national security, as well as police-led mass DNA collection and surveillance programs. Two of his most recent publications concern mass DNA collection programs in China.

Thank you, all three of you, for joining us for this hearing. Without objection, your full written statements will be entered into the record. We ask that you keep your remarks to five minutes. We'll begin with Dr. Koesel.

**STATEMENT OF KARRIE J. KOESEL,
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME**

Ms. KOESEL. Good morning and thank you. Chair Merkley, Co-chair McGovern, and distinguished members of the Commission, I'm honored to participate in today's hearing. In my remarks, I will focus on three long-term strategies used to assert Chinese government control over religion and the implications for religious groups on the ground.

As we know, contemporary China represents one of the most restrictive environments for religion and religious communities around the globe. The reach of the Chinese state into religious life is extensive. This first strategy of control utilizes technology. In the past decades, strategies of religious management have expanded with the development of digital and surveillance technologies. These technologies facilitate systematic and coordinated efforts to collect information, to monitor, and to target religious communities, especially those perceived as operating outside of state-set parameters or those viewed as extremists.

The Chinese surveillance state monitors social media to identify and collect information on religious believers and their networks. It uses phone apps to transmit information on user activity and their locations, facial recognition technology, and CCTV cameras at temples, churches, and mosques to keep tabs on not only attendance, but also the content of religious services. Religious life is ostensibly monitored at every level—in public, in private, and virtually.

The implications: First, expanding digital technologies accelerate the crackdown on unregistered religious groups. These are groups not formally affiliated with government-sponsored patriotic associations and they operate in private. They tend to include Protestant house churches, underground Catholic churches, but also unregistered Buddhists, Daoists, and Muslims, as well as practitioners of folk and popular religions. The growing sophistication of the Chinese surveillance state means it is increasingly difficult for these communities to operate under the radar.

A second implication is that control of religious expression online is increasing. Online forums, microblogs, and instant messaging platforms face increased censorship. These online communities are seen as vehicles of “religious infiltration” and a source of religious growth, especially among Chinese young people on college campuses.

A second strategy is sinicization. Religious communities have been asked over the past decade to sinicize. This is a long-term strategy to manage religious life, to insulate it from “foreign influence” by making it more Chinese, but more importantly, to instill fealty to the Party-state. Sinicization prioritizes the integration of politics and ideology, as well as support for the leadership of the Party at the center of religion.

At present in China, there is no central policy articulating how sinicization should develop. Instead, this has been left up to the five patriotic associations to introduce their own plans. Now, it is within each of these plans that we can see a clear political direction. The Catholic plan, for instance, asserts that sinicization requires conscientious approval of politics and obedience to the na-

tional regime. The Protestant plan calls on pastors to harmonize biblical teachings with ideology and to preach core socialist values. The Buddhist plan prioritizes the study of Xi Jinping Thought. Even Daoism, an indigenous religion in China, has developed a plan to sinicize.

The takeaway here is that sinicization centers on the “Partyfication” of religion. It is a strategy to politically reorient China’s faithful, not embrace traditional culture or Chinese values. One implication is that sinicization efforts on the ground are currently quite uneven. Religious communities have some flexibility in interpreting sinicization, and the Party seems content to allow some latitude so long as the efforts show necessary reverence.

A second implication is that the long-term impact remains uncertain. It remains to be seen whether sinicization will rein in religion, cultivate love for and loyalty to the CCP, or divide religious communities internally. Historically in China, processes of sinicization actually encouraged religious growth, so this may be one outcome.

The final strategy I wish to highlight on controlling religion is more outward facing. This is the so-called Three Troops strategy launched under Xi Jinping, which brings together Party and government officials, prominent religious representatives, and academics to counter what are perceived as U.S.-led international efforts to promote religious freedom. The implication here is that Chinese strategies of religious management are shifting. They’re shifting from defense to offense, and from domestic to global, with the broader goal to counter and to quiet foreign advocacy for religious freedom.

I’d like to close with a few recommendations. U.S. advocacy for religious groups in China and calls to protect religious freedom and human rights, can backfire, because we know this is seen as evidence domestically in China of fomenting instability or foreign forces trying to divide the country. However, there are steps we can and should take to support freedom of religion and belief. Bilateral engagement. We need to consistently raise issues of religious freedom and human rights in China in public and in private meetings with our Chinese counterparts. We should work with U.S. allies and partners to take similar action, especially in the Muslim-majority world.

Second, we need to build expertise. We need to prioritize funding domestically to maintain U.S. expertise on China. It is a national security imperative that we increase support and training of American students and scholars in China and the Chinese language.

In closing, I’d like to thank the Commission for your attention and leadership on this important set of issues. My written testimony elaborates on the strategies and offers additional recommendations. I look forward to answering any questions you have. Thank you.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you, Dr. Koesel.
We’ll turn now to Dr. Meserole.

**STATEMENT OF CHRIS MESEROLE, DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH,
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY
INITIATIVE, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION**

Mr. MESEROLE. Chairman Merkley, Co-chairman McGovern, distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you this morning on such a vital and important issue. Although there is a growing awareness of the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party's model of digital authoritarianism, the extent to which its expansion has converged with the Xi regime's increasing restrictions on religious freedom is far less well known. I'm grateful for the chance to share my thoughts on how that convergence came to pass, the unprecedented challenges it poses for freedom of religion within China and around the globe, and how the United States should respond.

After the arrival of the internet in China in the late 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party was quick to recognize both the risks and opportunities posed by digital technology and began building out an unprecedented apparatus for online censorship and surveillance. When Xi Jinping took power in 2012, he moved quickly to consolidate that apparatus under his control, while also investing heavily in the equipment, infrastructure, and training to build out real-world surveillance programs, like SkyNet, smart cities, Sharp Eyes, and early pilots of the social credit system. Since these systems often lack due process and public oversight, the Xi regime has effectively built out the world's most comprehensive digital architecture for repression.

Unfortunately, the Xi regime has also, in tandem, built out a legal and bureaucratic architecture for religious repression, too. Most notably, Beijing has sought to rein in what it views as religious extremism in Xinjiang and Tibet. But the Xi regime's efforts to curtail religious freedom extend well beyond its counterterrorism policy. In 2016, Xi held a two-day conference on religion in which he previewed strict new religious regulations across China and urged the CCP to "actively guide the adaptation of religions." Several years later, another set of regulations came into effect requiring religious organizations to "spread the principles and policies of the Chinese Communist Party."

These regulations were so far reaching that a Chinese Catholic priest lamented that in practice, your religion no longer matters—if you are Buddhist, or Daoist, or Muslim, or Christian. The only religion allowed is faith in the Chinese Communist Party. Regrettably, the Xi regime's effort to control all religious life then directly converged with its effort to expand digital surveillance in late 2021. Although Chinese officials had imposed some measures to regulate online religious activity before—most notably their decision to ban the sale of Bibles online—Xi himself brought the issue to the fore in another conference on religion at the end of last year.

In addition to reiterating his earlier call for the sinicization of religion, Xi's remarks at the conference insisted that "China must strengthen the management of online religious affairs." Soon thereafter, Chinese officials then released new regulations banning foreign organizations from publishing content online and requiring registered religious organizations to receive licenses for streaming religious services and ceremonies. Shortly after the regulations

came into effect in March 2022, provincial governments began training new staff to censor online religious activity and ensure compliance with the new regulations.

Importantly, these new regulations represent a significant and troubling expansion of China's surveillance state. Provincial authorities will still play a leading role in regulating religion, as they have historically, but with the key agencies responsible for the Chinese surveillance apparatus also jointly issuing the new regulations—including the Ministry of Public Security—the oversight of religious activity now formally extends far beyond local administrators. Put in Orwellian terms, Big Brother now has clear authority to extend its watchful eye over people of faith.

For Chinese citizens, what this means is that the surveillance and regulatory system that has long monitored their public religiosity now extends to private faith, too. GPS sensors in smartphones and cars, plus facial recognition that can track citizens across a city, make it difficult for private and covert religious communities to form and operate undetected. Meanwhile, client- and server-side scanning have made it possible to detect private religious activity like downloading a picture of the Dalai Lama or reading a Bible, while smart televisions and cellphones make it possible to remotely watch and hear private prayers within a home. Most importantly, the knowledge that state authorities are able to monitor even private religious activity can create a chilling effect that ultimately deters individuals from engaging in private religious expression at all.

China's ongoing zero-COVID policy stands to exacerbate these trends. With COVID restrictions requiring the frequent closure of houses of worship, online platforms and smartphone applications have enabled many household churches and other religious organizations to remain in community. The recent online regulations thus remove a key option for exercising private and public religion at a time when it is needed most.

Yet, as devastating as the Xi regime's digital authoritarianism and religious repression are for the Chinese people, they will not be felt solely within China's borders. The country has not only exploited popular messaging applications like WeChat to monitor diaspora communities abroad, it has also willingly sold its surveillance technologies for everything from computer vision to deep packet inspection to over 80 countries, including those like Iran, whose political leaders have explicitly lauded China's surveillance model and whose regime has a long history of targeting religious minorities for repression.

The Xi regime's expansion of its surveillance state and recent crackdown on religious activity both online and offline cry out for a forceful response from the United States. Although the Biden administration has taken an increasingly hard line toward Beijing, particularly in denying it access to many of the advanced technologies its surveillance system relies on, much more can and should be done. Most notably, the U.S. Government needs to formulate and execute a coherent plan for countering digital authoritarianism globally and, as important, organize itself for the long-term nature of that threat.

Absent a more comprehensive and persistent approach, the system of digital repression that has so tragically denied religious freedom to residents of Xinjiang and Tibet will not only persist but stands to be replicated among religious communities across the globe.

In closing, thank you again for the chance to testify this morning, and even more for casting light on the daunting new era of religious persecution that the Chinese Communist Party has ushered in. Thank you again.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you, Dr. Meserole.

Now we'll turn to Dr. Dirks.

**STATEMENT OF EMILE DIRKS,
POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW, CITIZEN LAB**

Mr. DIRKS. Distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to participate. Today through my testimony I would like to highlight three aspects of the Chinese government's control of religion through digital authoritarianism. One, Chinese police engage in widespread digital surveillance of practitioners of banned faiths. Two, to surveil these practitioners, China's police collaborate with other Party-state offices. And three, police are now engaged in a mass DNA collection program targeting the people of Tibet.

Understanding these surveillance programs and developing effective policies and responses requires researchers capable of analyzing Chinese language sources. Therefore, today I will recommend that the United States Government provide greater Federal funding to Chinese and minority language learning programs at universities and colleges.

My first point, well known to those who study state surveillance in China, is that China's police digitally surveil practitioners of banned faiths. Operating outside China's system of officially recognized religions, China's banned faiths include Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God, among others. To Chinese police, practitioners of banned faiths are "target people" who threaten social stability. As target people, practitioners are surveilled through police-run databases. Police collect personal data from practitioners, including data on their faith, and then categorize them according to the level of threat they purportedly pose.

As a form of digital surveillance, these databases severely restrict practitioners' freedom. Police files on registered practitioners are associated with machine-readable national ID cards. For example, when a practitioner uses their national ID card to check into a hotel room, an alert is sent to the local police. Based on this alert, police can intercept the practitioner to interrogate or detain them. However, police cannot control practitioners through digital surveillance alone. This leads to my second point.

In order to deepen state control of practitioners of banned faiths, police routinely collaborate with other Party-state offices to visit practitioners at their homes. These home visits play multiple roles. On one hand, authorities may provide economically disadvantaged practitioners with social assistance. Assistance is meant to encourage practitioners to break with their faith and return to mainstream society. On the other hand, home visits are also used to

search for evidence of ongoing worship or to warn practitioners against associating with fellow believers. Home visits can also strengthen digital surveillance. Through home visits, Party-state officials collect personal information on practitioners, which is then added to police databases.

Authorities have long used home visits and digital surveillance against religious authorities. In the Tibet Autonomous Region, even practitioners of officially recognized religions, like Tibetan Buddhism, are subject to intense state control. However, in the Xi Jinping administration, new forms of biometric surveillance have emerged. This brings me to my third point.

Since 2016, police in the Tibet Autonomous Region have engaged in a mass DNA collection program targeting the whole of the region. Mass DNA collection in Tibet is unconnected to any ongoing criminal investigation. Instead, police have targeted entire communities of Tibetan men, women, and children for DNA collection. The scale of DNA collection is immense. My research suggests that since June 2016, police may have collected DNA samples from between one-quarter and one-third of Tibet's population, or between 919,000 and 1.2 million DNA samples. DNA collection appears to be ongoing, and when completed, a mass DNA database covering Tibet will give police a powerful tool of social control to use against the region's people.

Through digital surveillance, inter-bureaucratic cooperation, and mass DNA collection, China's police surveil and repress religious and ethnic minority communities. Understanding these developments requires researchers capable of analyzing the Chinese language sources that describe these surveillance programs. However, according to some reports, the study of foreign languages at U.S. universities and colleges is declining. This is worrying. If this trend is not reversed, the United States Government may lack future researchers capable of understanding the control of religion through digital authoritarianism in China. This in turn will undermine the United States Government's capacity to craft effective policies in response.

Therefore, I recommend that the United States Government do two things. One, increase Federal funding for Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese language programs at universities and colleges. And two, increase Federal funding for language learning programs at universities and colleges focused on minority languages spoken in China, including various Tibetan dialects, Uyghur, and others. Increased funding for language studies will lay a strong foundation for future research into the control of religion through digital authoritarianism in China. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions and comments.

Chair MERKLEY. I really appreciate the testimony from all three of you.

I want to start with trying to understand better the control of information. I was thinking back to 2011, when Majority Leader Reid organized a bipartisan delegation of 10 senators to visit China. Hu Jintao was the leader of China, and everything we heard while we were there was about how things were opening up, that there was less repression of religion, that labor leaders who had concerns were being encouraged to present them so that those issues could

be addressed, and that environmentalists who were raising concerns about pollution in the rivers were no longer considered critics but helpful advocates on how to address serious problems.

There was just kind of a whole trend. Then in 2012, 10 years ago, Xi Jinping became general secretary, and will probably soon be assigned to his third five-year term. It feels to me, as an outside observer, a nonexpert, that his personal vision for China has been driving a reversal of the trends that we saw in 2011, so I wanted to ask, and I don't want to take up the whole seven minutes with it, but perhaps Dr. Meserole, do you want to take this question on—Is it right to perceive that really Xi Jinping is driving this massive national crackdown that has many aspects, including the crackdown on religious worship?

Mr. MESEROLE. I think it's certainly right to pin the extent and scale of the current crackdown on Xi Jinping and the regime that he sits on top of. I will note that the kind of digital surveillance apparatus that he inherited long pre-dated him. It's something that emerged in the early 1990s and was progressively built out alongside the growth of the internet within China.

What changed under Xi Jinping was twofold. I think in the broader sense of opening that you had mentioned, there had been this series of reforms that the Deng Xiaoping era from the early 1980s on had ushered in, in the sense that China needed to open up and engage a little bit more with the rest of the world, which would be key to their economic growth. And I think that proved tremendously successful in terms of the economic growth that they were able to achieve.

By the time Xi Jinping came in, I think that growth had started to slow a little bit, and on top of that, he himself inherited an administration that had decentralized over three decades by that point. Most of the focus had been decentralizing out some of the different centers of power within China. As an example of that, there were something like 60 different regulatory agencies overseeing the internet and having say over different pieces of the internet when Xi Jinping came to power.

One of the first things he did when it comes to digital repression is consolidate all of those agencies under the Cyberspace Administration of China, and also to elaborate a little bit more clearly what the control authorities of different agencies are under his direction. As a result, he's been able over the last 10 years to exert greater and greater control over the digital surveillance system that they've developed, to the point where now I think the scale, the extent, the reach, all of which are really unprecedented, I think do owe to him, and he is certainly the most responsible for both how it's built out and how it's directed at this point. I think especially in light of the upcoming third term, potentially, I think it's alarming that he has so much control over it.

Chair MERKLEY. Well, this digital surveillance is so scary, and then you throw in the DNA database surveillance. I'm reminded of a movie from 25 years ago that was called "Gattaca." The name came from the initials that represented four bases of DNA. Nobody could move without being watched very carefully, both from the perspective of what they were doing online and their DNA. And here we are. This science fiction has become a reality.

One of the pieces of this is the monitoring of websites. Help us understand this. We hear that you now have to be registered to be able to have a website that expresses anything that involves religion. So in my mind, I'm picturing a system where no websites are allowed to be accessed unless they're preregistered, and I'm also picturing the Great Firewall. Are there a thousand Chinese basically tracking every church in the world that's putting something up on the web and saying, oh, their website cannot be accessed?

Is it an opt-in or opt-out system? How do they do this? I'm really struck by the fact that you can now not put your baptism up online, or a sermon up online. That the CathAssist Catholic app was shut down in just a month. That in May 2022, just a few months ago, China Aid Association reported that a website that had been up for 21 years, a Christian website, a repository of music and hymns, was shut down, and so on and so forth. Help us understand how the website control is being operated.

Mr. MESEROLE. Yes. It's a great point. I would say that there are actually two levels of censorship of religious activity. If you are a church, or a mosque, or a temple in China and you're trying to have some kind of web presence, one option is to go out and just register a domain name and have an actual website that your organization controls and owns. To do that, you need to register. When somebody logs onto a browser and enters your URL into the browser and wants to visit your site, what there is on the back end is a database of domain names that then can take that string of text that you entered in for the URL and then translate it into the server that posts the content for that site.

What China can do is basically say, you need to have certain kinds of registration requirements to be able to get a domain name that we will put into our global database of domain names, and what servers they point to on the internet. It's this crucial chokepoint where the human-readable part of the web meets the digital, numeric part of the web, and they can very actively and easily set up processes where, again, you might need to register for a license to be able to get a domain name. That'll be tied to that central database that they have for domain names. That's fairly straightforward to block, and it's something that the government is going to have control over.

The other way to do it is—even now in the United States, for example, you'll see different religious communities sometimes not even register a website anymore. They'll just go on Facebook, or they'll use a social media app as their main kind of online presence. Similar things can happen within China, where the responsibility starts to lie less with the state and more with those private companies.

Actually, one of the things that I'm most concerned about with this new set of online religious regulations is that the same thing that we've seen play out in the nonreligious space, where commercial entities within China are held more and more responsible for taking a proactive stance in censoring content, that this will actually start to come into play with religion, too. If a religious community is trying to use WeChat or another app as its de facto home online, that application now is responsible for censoring that.

They're actually going to be more conservative than the government in many cases in censoring content because for them it's not always clear what kind of communities are and aren't allowed and so they'll default to the most conservative interpretation of that to stay in the good graces of the state. But between that and the domain name registration issue, it's very straightforward for China to be able to start to block religious groups from having an online presence and being able to communicate with their community that way.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you. It's scary as hell, and I'm worried about all the forms in which this affects us here within the United States as well, as we address the challenges of technology. What China's doing and the example they're setting for other authoritarian regimes is transforming the world and so I'm so glad we're holding this hearing.

Co-chair MCGOVERN.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Dirks, thank you for the detail in your testimony about the collection of DNA of Tibetans in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It's very troubling, and I know it's not isolated. Human Rights Watch says that coercing people to give blood samples can violate an individual's privacy, dignity, and right to bodily integrity, and may constitute a degrading treatment, and as a mass policy is a serious human rights violation. What steps can the United States take to ensure that American companies are not complicit in this, or that the research efforts do not use this data?

Mr. DIRKS. Thank you for your question. Yes, the program, as detailed both in my own research and also in the recent report by Human Rights Watch, is quite disturbing. In terms of how the United States Government or allies can ensure that non-Chinese companies are not involved in these programs—one of the ways is to examine public procurement documents to ensure that material produced by companies outside of China is not being used in mass DNA collection programs, for example in Tibet.

But again, going back to my recommendations, one of the things that this requires is researchers that are able to dig through the public record, that is often Chinese, and actually analyze these sources. So I think, again, it's vital that we provide funding to Chinese language programs to ensure that researchers are actually capable of doing this kind of open-source research in the future, which in turn would help to inform effective U.S. Government policy in the future.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you.

Mr. Meserole, you testify to China's role not only in exploiting digital surveillance technology but in providing the model that has normalized the practice of religiously motivated repression globally. You specifically cite the case of Saudi Arabia, and the fact that it has used Israeli tech, not Chinese, to surveil and target dissident communities at home and abroad. From the perspective of the individual, do the human rights implications of digital surveillance differ depending on the status of the relations between the U.S. Government and the government doing the surveilling? As a public policy matter, would the challenges of digital authoritarianism be bet-

ter addressed by focusing on the technologies and their use, or by focusing on select countries?

Mr. MESEROLE. Just to answer the first part of the question about whether, from an individual's experience, it really matters, I would say if you're being repressed and you're being denied your ability to exercise religious freedom, I'm not sure exactly that you'd care what layer of the text app that's happening at, or who's in control of that. It does matter, I think, the U.S. involvement there, in the sense that I think we have leverage over different regimes that we can use and exercise to get them to push back on this kind of technology.

That's where I would turn to the second part of your question about digital authoritarianism. I think we want to highlight certainly that there are particular regimes like China, like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others, that I think are actively developing these kinds of surveillance systems. My big fear is that there are 5 billion people in the world who are not in China, not in the U.S. or Europe, and their digital infrastructure is being built out right now. We need to have a proactive and coherent foreign policy, effectively, for how we want to handle this challenge of digital authoritarianism so that individuals around the world are able to exercise their religion freely, are able to worship freely, are able to go online freely.

I think we would probably be better served if there were a single coherent policy for the U.S. Government on digital authoritarianism, rather than what we see now, which is, China pops up and does something, Iran pops up and does something, and we're addressing it on a case-by-case basis as opposed to taking a much more proactive and coherent view, which would ideally be the direction we would go in, especially given the long-term nature of the challenge.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you very much.

Dr. Koesel, what are your thoughts on the upcoming renewal of the Sino-Vatican agreement, and the Vatican's position going in?

Ms. KOESEL. Thank you for your question, Congressman.

I should start by saying I haven't reviewed the documents. I don't believe they're publicly available. So going into it, I think it's more "wait and see" as to what will come out of this agreement. We haven't seen what this will mean for religious communities within China, especially the Catholic Church, and whether we'll see a greater integration between underground Catholics and the official Catholic church. I think that is the hope, potentially, coming from the Vatican, that this will be a pathway to allow greater expression for religiosity within China and a healing and bringing of these two churches together. But at this point, it is wait and see until those documents, or whatever will be released, are available.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I'll yield back my time.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you.

Congressman McGovern, the Senate vote is underway. I know that we have Congresswoman Hartzler waiting to ask questions. Can I turn the gavel over to you for the balance of the hearing?

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Absolutely.

I'll turn to Representative Hartzler.

Chair MERKLEY. Great. Thank you.

Representative HARTZLER. Thank you. Thank you both, Mr. Chairman.

This question is for Chris Meserole. To what extent are U.S. companies implicated in the PRC's digital repression of religion? And are there instances of U.S. application stores removing religious apps from their storefronts at the request of the PRC? And are there areas where U.S. companies might be vulnerable to participation, knowingly or unknowingly, in the repression of religion?

Mr. MESEROLE. That's a great question. I think to the question about whether American companies are actively engaging in removing religious content, I think it's undeniably true at this point. You know, if you go to Amazon.cn, you can't buy a Bible there. If you use an iPhone, there are certain kinds of religious apps that are not allowed within China, because they follow the Chinese law.

I don't think it's controversial to say it's a challenge for American companies to operate in China and not follow these restrictions, which means that pretty much any American company operating in China and putting out a consumer application or platform app store, they're going to run into these issues and they're going to have to comply with China, or else they're going to have to leave the country. Those who are still there, I think we have to assume, are in compliance with what China is doing.

More broadly, I think that there's also the question of American firms and their involvement or the use of their products within the surveillance state itself. I've been really heartened to see the more aggressive steps that the White House has started to take recently, especially when it comes to export control, things like the export control restrictions on Nvidia's GPUs for cloud computing servers, which are really the best servers that you would want to use to train AI models, in particular the kind of AI models that are used in facial recognition, the best-performing models for facial recognition.

We know that China has developed machine learning models to explicitly identify religious minorities as they pass through the country. Those models were more likely than not trained on either Nvidia GPUs or AMD GPUs. By banning the sale of those GPUs to China, it won't cripple them from being able to develop those kinds of models, but it will hamper their ability to do them at scale, especially if these technologies mature, so I think ideally we would continue to place more and more restrictions on the kinds of unique hardware that China relies on the U.S. for to literally build out the surveillance apparatus that it's been developing.

Representative HARTZLER. That is encouraging, that there's at least some pushback that we are doing to be helpful here. We do not want to be complicit in any of this, and anything that we can do to stop this spread around the world, and also to help the people of China, we need to do.

Thank you very much to all the witnesses for your testimony and your work. I really appreciate it. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you very much. I don't see any other members or senators on the call, so I will bring the questioning to an end.

Let me just thank the panelists again. I think you're reminding us all about how important language promotion is, something we need to act on in the House version of the COMPETES bill. There was a provision to put more money toward promoting the issue of language. I mean, we need to be teaching not just Mandarin but all the different dialects of China. Hopefully we can continue to build on that and maybe figure out a way to get the Senate to take it, and we can move on that. I also thought the suggestion that we need a common U.S. holistic policy on digital surveillance is something that we need to pursue.

Again, I thank all of you for being with us and for your excellent testimony. We may have additional questions, which we'll follow up with in writing, but let me just bring this hearing to a close and say thank you to everybody. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:43 a.m., the hearing was concluded.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS

PREPARED STATEMENT OF NURY TURKEL

Good morning, Chairman Merkley, Co-chair McGovern, and Honorable Members of the Commission. Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, at this important hearing.

I truly appreciate your steadfast leadership and continuing attention to the Chinese government's religious freedom abuses targeting many ethnic and religious communities across China, including Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, underground Catholic and Protestant house church Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners, to name a few.

For decades, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has placed religion under tight, comprehensive, and coercive control. It exercises control by using arbitrary laws and regulations and implementing them through a complex but sophisticated web of Party and government agencies at all levels, including the CCP's United Front Work Department, State Administration for Religious Affairs, and China's Public Security and State Security apparatus.

Anyone suspected of violating the CCP's religious policies is severely punished. China's egregious abuses against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims is a case in point and one which the U.S. Government has determined amounts to genocide. Even the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' recent Xinjiang report confirmed that severe violations have occurred and may amount to crimes against humanity.

The crackdown on religion has become increasingly harsh in recent years under the brutal rule of CCP leader Xi Jinping, leading some experts to call his decade-long reign the "bitter winter for religious freedom in China."

Xi Jinping's new regulation on religion, the "Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services," represents a new low for Xi and his government. Its impact cannot be overstated, as the regulation imposes new restrictions on religious activities, further constricting the narrow space in which religious groups can operate.

This new regulation has a particularly significant and adverse impact on independent, unregistered religious communities. Due to the government's severe persecution, many of them rely on online platforms and resources for religious education and training, religious gatherings and worship, and other religious activities. These online platforms and smartphone apps are often the only viable means through which these religious communities can carry out activities and connect with one another, especially during the strict COVID-19 lockdowns.

The negative impact of this regulation is already being felt across China since it went into effect in March 2022. Chinese authorities have recruited hundreds, if not thousands, of auditors to target and censor religious content on the Chinese internet. Christian and Tibetan Buddhist groups have reported that their websites and WeChat virtual groups were shut down and are no longer accessible. USCIRF is concerned that this regulation will lead to more persecution and abuses, especially for groups with foreign connections.

The regulation also imposes tighter restrictions on state-sanctioned religious groups. These groups are required to submit detailed information to authorities to apply for a permit to operate online. In addition, they are required to self-censor their religious materials on the internet. Therefore, even state-sanctioned religious groups are not safe and could be punished if they are found to be non-compliant with the government's policies.

We are all aware that the Chinese government routinely monitors and censors all kinds of online content, including religious materials. But this new regulation is the first of its kind designed to specifically target religious content on the internet, and it has created a chilling effect for many religious groups and individuals. It is tantamount to a total ban on religious activities, as many groups are no longer able to operate in person or online.

The order to de-religionize the internet came from the highest echelon of the Party, Xi Jinping. At the 2016 China National Conference on Religious Work attended by high-level party and government officials, Xi Jinping expressed particular displeasure toward the phenomenon of “internet religions.” Five years later at the 2021 China National Conference on Religious Work, Xi again emphasized the need to “strengthen the management of religious affairs on the internet.”

It is important to note that Xi Jinping sees religion as fundamentally connected to national security. As a consequence, he has underscored the need to fight against “foreign infiltration through the use of religion” and “religious extremism,” including on the internet. This new regulation is an integral part of the CCP’s “Sinicization policy” to subjugate and control all ethnic and religious groups, coercing support and loyalty to the CCP rule and its policies, or else face severe consequences.

Mr. Chairman, this new regulation is the latest example of the CCP expanding and refining its techno-authoritarianism toolkit at home, as it tries to intimidate and coerce its own citizens to perpetuate its rule. Ethnic minority regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, in particular, have borne the brunt of the CCP’s technology-enhanced brutality in recent years, as the China Commission has well documented.

The CCP has been exporting its techno-authoritarianism overseas to countries with poor human rights records as well. Oppressive regimes can emulate the “China model” to persecute political dissidents and human rights advocates. The U.S. Government and companies must continue to ensure that critical technology is not exported to China and contributing to any religious freedom abuses abroad.

USCIRF also recommends that the U.S. Government impose more targeted sanctions on Chinese officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations, especially those within the United Front Work Department, the State Administration for Religious Affairs, as well as China’s public security and state security apparatus. These entities are directly involved in the drafting, implementation, and enforcement of the new regulation on internet religious activities.

In closing, I would like to thank the Commission again for the opportunity to testify and for your attention to the plight of all persecuted ethnic and religious groups in China. I look forward to your questions.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF KARRIE J. KOESEL

Chair Merkley, Co-chair McGovern, and distinguished members of the Commission. I am honored to participate in today’s hearing on the control of religion in China through digital authoritarianism.

In my remarks today, I will focus my attention on three strategies used to assert Chinese government control over religion and the implications for religious life. These strategies are part of a long-term and coordinated effort to contain and transform religion in China.

BACKGROUND

Contemporary China represents one of the most restrictive environments for religion and religious communities around the globe.¹ This is not by accident, but by design. Since coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has promoted state atheism, viewed religion as an impediment to the advancement of socialism, an ideological competitor, and vehicle for foreign influence.

The CCP’s approach toward religion has been guided by twin goals of containment and control. Religious life has been tolerated, so long as it stays within tightly defined parameters and serves the interests of the party-state. The Chinese government recognizes only five religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism), ritual and worship are restricted to registered sites, religious communities are channeled into religious patriotic associations, and clergy must be trained

¹ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China,” August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assessment.pdf>; Office of International Religious Freedom, “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom,” US Department of State, May 12, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>; Samirah Majumdar and Virginia Villa, “Globally, Social Hostilities Related to Religion Decline in 2019,” *Pew Research Center*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/09/30/globally-social-hostilities-related-to-religion-decline-in-2019-while-government-restrictions-remain-at-highest-levels/>.

in government-sanctioned seminaries where 30 percent of the curriculum is devoted to patriotic and ideological education.²

The reach of the Chinese state into religious life is extensive.

STRATEGY 1: DIGITAL & SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGIES

Under General Secretary Xi Jinping, strategies of religious management have expanded with the development of digital and surveillance technologies. These technologies facilitate systematic and coordinated efforts to collect information, and monitor and target religious groups and practitioners, especially those perceived as operating outside of state-set parameters or viewed as security threats.

The Chinese surveillance state monitors social media to identify and collect information on religious believers and their networks; it tracks phone apps that transmit information on user activity and location; it utilizes facial recognition technology to follow movement; and relies on an impressive array of CCTV cameras at temples, churches, and mosques to keep tabs on attendance and the content of religious services.

Recent measures regulating religious information online bring religious communities in compliance with other laws on Internet security. Religious associations, schools, and monasteries must obtain a license for maintaining websites and online religious content must be approved by government representatives at provincial religious affairs departments.³

Religious life is ostensibly monitored at every level—in public, in private, and virtually.

IMPLICATIONS

- **Expanding digital technologies accelerates the crackdown on unregistered religious groups.** Religious communities not formally affiliated with the government-sponsored religious patriotic associations operate with no legal protections. These communities meet in private homes, hotels, factories, fields, and in virtual communities; they include Protestant house churches, members of the underground Catholic Church, unregistered Buddhists, Daoists, and Muslims and practitioners of popular and folk religions. The growing sophistication of the Chinese surveillance state means it is increasingly difficult for unregistered communities to operate under the radar.
- **Control of online religious expression is increasing.** Religious online forums, microblogs, and instant messaging platforms run by individuals face increased censorship (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, QQ, RenRen). These online tools and virtual communities are seen as a vehicle of “religious infiltration” and source of religious growth on college campuses.⁴

STRATEGY 2: SINICIZATION

Under General Secretary Xi, religious communities have been asked to sinicize. Sinicization is a long-term strategy to insulate religious life from foreign influence by making it “more Chinese” and ensuring fealty to the party-state.⁵ Specifically, Sinicization prioritizes the integration of political ideology and support for the CCP. A handbook for Chinese government officials outlines the Sinicization of religion as:

Religious personnel and believers must identify and agree with politics, love the motherland, support the socialist system, support the leadership of the CCP, and abide by the laws, regulations, and policies of the country; Integrate culturally, meaning to interpret religious teachings according to the requirement of contemporary China’s development and process and in line

²“Order of SARA No. 16, Measures for the Administration of Religious School [in Chinese],” Chinese Government Web, April 23, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5623053.htm.

³“Regulations on Religious Affairs,” SARA, Chinese Government Web, February 1, 2018, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm; “Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services,” Chinese Government Web, March 1, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2022/content_5678093.htm.

⁴Ge Chengguang, “An Analysis of the Influence of Internet on College Students’ Religious Beliefs,” *Gong Wu Yuan*, <https://www.21ks.net/lunwen/zjxy/w/76485.html>.

⁵Xinhua, “Xi Calls for Improved Religious Work,” April 24, 2016, China.org.cn, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-04/24/content_38312410.htm.

with the excellent traditional Chinese culture; Adapt to society, adjust religious concepts, systems, organizations, etc.⁶

Put simply, Sinicization is the “partyfication” of religion.

It is important to note that Sinicization is not new to China nor to the CCP. Xi’s predecessors from Mao to Hu all took steps to adapt Marxism-Leninism to a Chinese context, which led to the development of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Sinicized Marxism.⁷ Foreign missionaries also attempted to root churches locally to make them more acceptable. Matteo Ricci dressed in Buddhist robes and introduced Catholicism through Confucian concepts.⁸ However, the CCP’s Sinicization of religion is distinct from earlier efforts in that it puts the party-state at the center of religious life.

At present, there is no central policy articulating how Sinicization should develop. Instead, the national religious patriotic associations have introduced five-year plans to answer Beijing’s call. It is within these plans we clearly observe the political direction.

The Catholic plan asserts that Sinicization “requires conscientious approval of politics. Love of the motherland and obedience to the national regime is the responsibility and obligation of every Christian.”⁹

The Protestant plan calls on pastors to harmonize Biblical teachings with the ideology of the party-state and to preach Core Socialist Values¹⁰ and patriotism from the pulpit and in seminaries.¹¹ It recommends displaying expressions of faith in forms such as traditional melody, calligraphy, and paper cutting. Pastors should blend notions of love and respect attributed to Mencius with Biblical teaching that focuses on loving others as yourself.

The Buddhist plan for Sinicization prioritizes the study and implementation of Xi Jinping Thought. Religious personnel are urged to accept and support the leadership of the party-state and promote Buddhist teachings in line with Core Socialist Values.¹²

The Islamic Association’s Sinicization plan highlights the integration of Chinese aesthetics and patriotism into religious and cultural life. This includes adopting Chinese styles of clothing to correct the practice of imitating foreign Islamic dress, promoting architectural styles in mosques that highlight Chinese elements, using “Confucianism to interpret scripture,” and teaching Core Socialist Values in mosque curriculum.¹³

Even Daoism—an indigenous religion to China—has developed a plan to Sinicize. The Daoist plan calls for incorporation of Xi Jinping Thought into the traditional Daoist canon and the promotion of patriotism and political education in religious circles.¹⁴

The takeaway from these plans is that Sinicization centers on the partyfication of religion.

⁶Zhong Ji, *Key Words for Party Members and Cadres to Study in the New Era* [in Chinese], (Beijing: Party Building Books Publishing House, 2019), 62.

⁷Hu Jintao, “Hu, Jintao’s Report at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China [in Chinese].” The State Council Information Office of the PRC, October 26, 2007, http://www.scio.gov.cn/37231/Document/1566887/1566887_11.htm; Wang Qi, “Why Does the General Secretary Place So Much Emphasis on the Sinicization of Religion in Our Country? [in Chinese].” December 6, 2021. UFDW of CPC, <http://www.zyztb.gov.cn/202112qwpl/364882.jhtml>; Yang Fenggang, “The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below,” *Religion in Chinese Societies* 18 (2021): 16–43.

⁸Matteo Ricci, Douglas Lancashire and Hu Guozhen, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven = Tianzhu Shiyi*. Chinese-English ed. by E.J. Malatesta, (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources in cooperation with the Ricci Institute, 1985).

⁹“Five-Year Work Plan for Advancing Adherence to the Direction of Sinicization of Catholicism in Our Country [in Chinese],” CPA and BCCCC, October 8, 2018, <https://www.chinacatholic.cn/html/report/18100224-2.htm>.

¹⁰Core Socialist Values have been articulated as a set of moral values to guide China’s national rejuvenation, and include prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, friendliness, and integrity; see, e.g., https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-10/12/content_33160115.htm.

¹¹“Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Sinicization of Christianity in Our Country (2018–2022) [in Chinese],” CCC and TSPM, March 27, 2018, <https://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283>.

¹²“Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Adhering to the Sinicization of Buddhism (2019–2023) [in Chinese],” Buddhist Association of China, November 14, 2019, <https://www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/e/action/ShowInfo.php?classid=506&id=40672>.

¹³“Outline for the Five-year Year Work Plan for Adhering to the Sinicization of Islam in China (2018–2022) [in Chinese],” <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yqRjY1eNTNZdEqq8n12MKg>.

¹⁴“Outline for the Five-Year Work Plan for Adhering to the Sinicization of Daoism (2019–2023) [in Chinese],” http://dao.china.com.cn/2019-11/14/content_40959194.htm.

IMPLICATIONS

- **Sinicization is a strategy to politically reorient China's faithful, not embrace traditional Chinese culture or values.** Sinicization seeks to subdue religion so that it aligns with the ambitions and interests of the party-state. Beijing is planning for a long-term coexistence with religion, and Sinicization is one answer to managing religious growth.
- **Sinicization efforts remain uneven.** Religious communities have some flexibility and are interpreting Sinicization in different ways. Some religions have incorporated Chinese folktales or Confucian parables into religious services. Others have embraced traditional clothing for clergy or integrated Chinese traditional architecture into building renovations. Still others have held flag-raising ceremonies, organized patriotic speech contests, or added photographs of Xi Jinping next to sacred objects. Thus far, the party-state seems content to allow flexibility, so long as Sinicization efforts show necessary reverence.
- **The long-term impact of Sinicization is uncertain.** It remains to be seen whether the Sinicization campaign will rein in religion, cultivate love and loyalty toward the CCP, or divide religious communities and foster resentment among China's faithful. Historically, processes of Sinicization have nourished religious growth in China, as external faiths have become more familiar and embedded in local traditions and social fabrics. Therefore, it is within the realm of possibility that Sinicization may increase religiosity, an outcome that Beijing is likely not anticipating.

STRATEGY 3: "THREE TROOPS"

The third strategy of religious management is outward facing. General Secretary Xi has called for the development of "Three Troops" to address major religious issues at home and abroad.¹⁵ The Three Troops initiative brings together party and government officials, prominent religious representatives, and academic researchers to improve China's ability to implement the Sinicization of religion, and, more importantly, to counter what is perceived as U.S.-led, international freedom of religion initiatives.

IMPLICATIONS

- **Chinese strategies of religious management are shifting from defense to offense.** The Three Troops initiative is intended to counter and quiet foreign advocacy for religious freedom in China.
- **Beijing is harnessing religion for soft power purposes.** There is growing recognition that religion is a beneficial form of soft power and can be used to enhance relations with countries and win public opinion, especially through infrastructure initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

RECOMMENDATIONS

International advocacy for Chinese religious communities and calls to protect religious freedom and human rights can backfire in China because it is seen as evidence of external forces seeking to divide China, foment instability, and challenge CCP rule. However, there are steps that can and should be taken to support freedom of religion and belief.

BILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

Consistently raise the issue of religious freedom and human rights in China in public and in private meetings with Chinese counterparts;

- Urge Chinese authorities to release prisoners of conscience who have been detained, placed under house arrest, or imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
- Press Chinese authorities to refrain from conflating peaceful religious activity with extremism and terrorism;

¹⁵ See, e.g., Xu Yihua, "The Background and Current Tasks of Cultivating the "Three Teams" of Religious Work: Learning from the Spirit of the 2021 National Conference on Religious Work," *The World Religious Culture* 1 (2022): 60911, <https://fdi.fudan.edu.cn/t2515/b0/a3/c21257a438435/page.htm>; "Welcome to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Opening a New Situation for Religious Work in a New Era," *China National Daily*, <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/report/22082392-1.htm>.

Work with U.S. allies and partners to take similar action, especially Muslim majority partners.

PATHWAY FOR REGISTRATION

Encourage Chinese officials to create a pathway for registration of unregistered religious communities that includes direct registration with the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), not through religious patriotic associations.

BUILD EXPERTISE

Prioritize funding to maintain U.S. expertise on China. It is a national security imperative that we invest and increase support for training American students and scholars in China and Chinese language. Federal support of DOE International Education programs, including Title VI and Fulbright-Hays is crucial.

In closing, I would like to thank the commission for your attention to this important set of issues. I look forward to answering any questions that you have.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHRIS MESEROLE

Chairman Merkley, Chairman McGovern, distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you this morning on such a vital and important issue.

Although there is a growing awareness of the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party's model of digital authoritarianism, the extent to which its expansion has converged with the Xi regime's increasing restrictions on religious freedom is far less well known. I'm grateful for the chance to share my thoughts on how that convergence came to pass, the unprecedented challenges it poses for freedom of religion within China and around the globe, and how the United States should respond.

CHINA'S SURVEILLANCE STATE AND RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGION

Before delving into how the Xi regime's rising digital authoritarianism intersects with its growing religious repression, each trend needs to be understood separately.

After the arrival of the internet in China in the late 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party was quick to recognize both the danger digital networks posed to the Party and also their potential for surveillance and control. By 1994 the State Council of China had placed supervision of the internet under the control of the Ministry of Public Security, and by 1997 *Wired* was running a cover story on the "Great Firewall of China."¹ Over the next decade, Chinese authorities invested heavily in state censorship and surveillance technologies, including packet inspection and IP blocking, as part of the Golden Shield project.² At the same time, Internet firms were increasingly held liable for hosting and transmitting prohibited speech, leading the largest firms—including foreign firms operating in the country—to develop robust censorship and moderation capabilities themselves.³ By the time Xi Jinping took power in 2012, Chinese authorities had established an online censorship and surveillance apparatus whose capabilities were even then unprecedented in scope. Xi moved quickly to consolidate that apparatus under his control, primarily by establishing the Cyberspace Administration of China and tasking it with overseeing the country's censorship and cybersecurity policies.⁴ As smartphone usage exploded over the past decade and hundreds of millions of Chinese have come online, the scale and reach of online censorship and surveillance under the Xi regime has expanded accordingly.

Yet the surveillance apparatus developed by Chinese authorities is not limited to the web alone. As prior testimony before this commission has shown, Beijing has also harnessed digital technology for off-line surveillance and monitoring, too.⁵ Most prominently, Chinese security services in Xinjiang and Tibet have leveraged cam-

¹"Freedom of Expression and the Internet in China: A Human Rights Watch Background," *Human Rights Watch*, 2001; Geremie R. Barme and Sang Ye, "The Great Firewall of China," *Wired*, 1 June 1997.

²Elizabeth C. Economy, "The Great Firewall of China: Xi Jinping's Internet Shutdown," *The Guardian*, 29 June 2018.

³"Race to the Bottom: Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship," *Human Rights Watch*, 9 Aug. 2006.

⁴AJ Caughey and Shen Lu and "How the CAC Became Chinese Tech's Biggest Nightmare," *Protocol*, 11 Mar. 2022.

⁵Samantha Hoffman, "China's Tech-Enhanced Authoritarianism," CECC Hearing, November 17, 2021; Yaqui Wang, "Testimony of Yaqui Wang," CECC Hearing, November 17, 2021.

eras, drones, smartphones, and biometric technology to turn those regions into what are effectively open air prisons.⁶ However, use of these surveillance technologies is by no means limited to Xinjiang and Tibet. Since 2005, when the Ministry of Public Safety and what is now the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology established the first “Skynet program,” Chinese officials have launched and expanded a wide range of digital surveillance efforts throughout the country.⁷ With prodding from Beijing, local authorities have invested heavily in the equipment, infrastructure, and training to build out Skynet as well as related surveillance efforts like Smart Cities, Sharp Eyes, and early pilots of the Social Credit System.⁸ The most sophisticated of these systems—which have seen widespread use during the pandemic, thanks to China’s Zero Covid policy—now also make it possible to track individuals in real time using facial recognition algorithms overlaid on drone cameras and CCTV feeds.⁹ Since these systems often lack due process and public oversight, the Xi regime has effectively built out the world’s most comprehensive architecture for digital repression.

Unfortunately, the Xi regime has in tandem built out a growing legal and bureaucratic architecture for religious repression. After banning religious activity outright during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese authorities had reversed course in the “Reform Era” that followed, most notably with the CCP Central Committee’s issuance of Document 19 in 1982. The result was a remarkable resurgence of religious communities across China, with government estimates recognizing a nearly fourfold increase in Protestantism alone between 1997 and 2018.¹⁰ Yet over the past decade, Beijing has once again sought to bring religion back under greater control. In part that effort has stemmed from Beijing’s efforts to rein in what it views as “religious extremism” in Xinjiang and Tibet; the country’s Counterterrorism-Terror Law of 2016, along with corresponding measures and regulations, granted local authorities in each region the power to detain individuals for otherwise conventional religious behavior, such as growing a long beard.¹¹

However, the Xi regime’s efforts to rein in religion extend well beyond its counterterrorism policy. In 2016, Xi held a two-day conference on religion during which he both outlined a more hardline vision for religious regulation and also called for greater Sinicization of religion, urging the CCP to “actively guide the adaptation of religions” and faith communities to “interpret religious doctrines in a way that is conducive to modern China’s progress and in line with our excellent traditional culture.”¹² The speech came amid a growing crackdown on Christian churches¹³ and in advance of new regulations requiring all religious organizations to register with the government.¹⁴ Soon after the regulations took effect in 2018, Xi then announced that the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) would be dissolved and its oversight function shifted to a new bureau in the CCP’s United Front Work Department, a move designed to bring the management of religion further under the Party’s control.¹⁵ In 2020, another set of regulations came into effect requiring religious organizations “to spread the principles and policies of the Chinese Communist Party” and to educate their adherents and leaders “to support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party” and to follow “the path of socialism with Chinese char-

⁶Nithin Coca, “China’s Digital Wall Around Tibet,” *Coda Story*, 16 May 2019.

⁷Zhang Zihan, “Beijing’s Guardian Angels?” *Global Times*, 10 Oct. 2012.

⁸Jessica Batke and Mareike Ohlberg, “Budgeting for Surveillance,” *ChinaFile*, October 30, 2022.

⁹Rebecca Heilweil, “Coronavirus is the first big test for futuristic tech that can prevent pandemics,” *Vox*, 27 Feb. 2020.

¹⁰“China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief,” Information Office of the State Council, 3 Apr. 2018; “White Paper—Freedom of Religious Belief in China,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States, Oct. 1997.

¹¹“China detains Uighurs for growing beards or visiting foreign websites, leak reveals,” *Guardian*, 17 Feb. 2020; “OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China,” *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 31 Aug. 2022, page 8.

¹²“Xi Calls for Improved Religious Work,” *Xinhua*, 24 Apr. 2016.

¹³Ian Johnson, “China Bans Online Bible Sales as It Tightens Religious Controls,” *The New York Times*, 5 Apr. 2018.

¹⁴Dominic J. Nardi, “The 2019 Regulation for Religious Groups in China,” *USCIRF*, February 2020.

¹⁵Alex Joske, “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work,” Jamestown, 9 May 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/>

acteristics.”¹⁶ In response to the regulations, a Chinese Catholic priest replied: “In practice, your religion no longer matters, if you are Buddhist, or Taoist, or Muslim or Christian: the only religion allowed is faith in the Chinese Communist Party.”¹⁷

The Xi regime’s effort to control religious life then converged with its growing attempts to regulate online activity in late 2021. Although Chinese officials had imposed some measures to regulate online religious activity before—most notably its decision to ban the sale of Bibles online,¹⁸ and a handful of stipulations in the religious regulations that took effect in 2018 and 2020¹⁹—Xi himself brought the issue to the fore in another conference on religion at the end of last year. In addition to reiterating his earlier call for the Sinicization of religion, Xi’s remarks at the conference pushed for greater regulation of digital religion and insisted that “China must strengthen the management of online religious affairs.”²⁰ Chinese officials then released new regulations banning foreign organizations from publishing content online and requiring registered religious organizations to receive licenses for streaming religious services and ceremonies.²¹ Shortly after the regulations came into effect in March 2022, provincial governments began training new staff to censor online religious activity and ensure compliance with the new regulations.²²

The new regulations represent a significant new expansion of China’s surveillance state. Provincial authorities will still play a leading role in regulating religion, as they have historically.²³ But with the key agencies responsible for China’s surveillance apparatus also jointly issuing the new regulations—namely, the Ministry of Public Security, the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and the Ministry for National Security—the oversight of religious activity now formally extends far beyond local administrators. If the impact of the new regulations can be put in Orwellian terms, what they mean is that “Big Brother” now has clear authority to extend its watchful eye over people of faith.

LOCAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

As I’ve noted in previous testimony, digital technology has provided extraordinary new capabilities for religious repression.²⁴ From the Spanish Inquisition to Stalinist Russia, modern nation-states have long sought to persecute religious activity, often to devastating effect. Indeed, this happened within China itself during the Cultural Revolution. Yet in pre-digital eras states were largely only able to regulate *public* religion; religiosity has always been a mix of public and private beliefs, behaviors, and institutions, and in practice state regulation has generally been limited to the former. Regulating the offline exercise of private religion is simply too difficult and costly for a state to carry out at scale—which is partly why, for example, religious communities in Maoist China were able to endure and flourish anew once religious restrictions were lifted.

However, the digital surveillance that China has pioneered allows for restrictions on even the private exercise of religion. GPS sensors in smartphones and cars, plus facial recognition that can track citizens across a city, make it difficult for private and covert religious communities to form and operate undetected. Likewise, client- and server-side scanning have made it possible to detect private religious activity like downloading a picture of a religious leader or reading a sacred text, and smart televisions and cellphones make it possible to remotely watch and hear private pray-

¹⁶ For background, see Eleanor Albert and Lindsay Maizland, “Religion in China,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 Sept. 2020; for translation, see Wang Zhicheng, “New Administrative Measures for Religious Groups,” *Asia News*, 31 Dec. 2019.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ian Johnson, “China Bans Online Bible Sales as It Tightens Religious Controls,” *The New York Times*, 5 Apr. 2018.

¹⁹ Article 48 of the 2020 regulations, for example, claimed that “internet religious information services” also had to comply with relevant laws and regulations concerning religious affairs.

²⁰ Amber Wang, “China’s latest crackdown on religion bans foreigners from spreading church and spiritual content online,” *South China Morning Post*, 22 Dec. 2021.

²¹ Tsukasa Hadano, “China Bans Online Religious Activity Ahead of Party Congress,” *Nikkei Asia*, 6 Jan. 2022.

²² John Zhang, “127 Persons Pass Internet Religious Information Service License Examination in Guangdong,” *China Christian Daily*, 28 June 2022. <http://chinachristiandaily.com/news/category/2022-06-28/127-persons-pass-internet-religious-information-service-license-examination-in-guangdong—11614>

²³ Article 5 of the new regulations: “The religious affairs departments of people’s governments at the provincial level and above, together with the network information departments, competent departments for telecommunications, public security organs, state security organs, and so forth, shall establish coordination mechanisms for the administration of Internet Religious Information Services.”

²⁴ Chris Meserole, “Technological Surveillance of Religion in China,” *USCIRF hearing*, July 22, 2020.

ers within a home. Most importantly, however, the knowledge that state authorities are able to monitor even private religious activity can create a chilling effect that ultimately seeks to deter individuals from engaging in private religious expression at all. By eroding faith that the private exercise of religion is possible, digital surveillance works to erode faith altogether.

Although China is still far from fully eradicating unlicensed religious activity, examples of their efforts still abound. The recent plight of Uighur Muslims in Western Xinjiang is most well known, with local authorities compiling massive DNA and facial recognition databases that can be used to track individual members of mosques and Islamic networks, as well as smartphone surveillance capable of blocking access to the Quran and censoring posts about Islam. Yet the state is not just interfering with the religious freedom of Turkic Muslims; Hui Muslims have also been jailed merely for creating WeChat groups to discuss the Quran.²⁵ Nor is the discrimination limited to Western China. Local authorities and security services across the rest of China have implemented facial recognition technology—provided by firms like Huawei, Magvii, and Tiandy—to indiscriminately identify individuals who may be Muslim.²⁶

Unfortunately, many of those technologies are readily applied to Buddhist and Christian communities too. In Tibet, merely storing an image of the Dalai Lama on a smartphone can warrant detention. And evading the authorities online and offline is increasingly difficult.²⁷ VPNs have been criminalized in the region, while an elaborate “digital wall” of cameras, drones, and remote sensing technologies has cut down the number of Tibetans successfully fleeing to Nepal by 97%.²⁸ Unregistered Christian Churches, which are viewed as a potential vector for foreign influence, have also been the subject of intense surveillance and censorship too. Pastors have been told to remove themselves from WeChat groups, while other clergy suspected of having ties to foreign churches have had their social media accounts and digital content banned.²⁹ Other underground or unregistered churches have been shut down entirely for refusing to comply with digital surveillance.³⁰

The combination of the new religious regulations, along with China’s ongoing “Zero Covid” policy, stand to exacerbate these trends. With Covid restrictions requiring the frequent closure of houses of worship (or serving as a pretext for their closure), online channels have offered a way for some religious organizations to remain in community. The new regulations thus threaten to remove a key option for exercising religion at a time when it is needed most.

Potential for Religious Repression Abroad

Although the Xi regime’s combination of digital authoritarianism and religious repression most directly impacts religious organizations within China, it also poses an urgent challenge to faith communities abroad. There are three particular dangers in that regard.

First, China’s efforts to digitally surveil and censor religious minorities extend well beyond its borders. As an illustration of how seriously Chinese authorities take the issue, in 2019 they expended a sophisticated “zero day” exploit for iOS devices on the Uighur diaspora. Chinese hackers had developed a way to gain root access to iPhone just by having the browser open a website, yet state authorities opted to exploit the vulnerability to monitor a small Uighur community abroad rather than a foreign political leader or high-value target.³¹ In addition, the Chinese have also sought to leverage WeChat to monitor ties between Christian communities abroad

²⁵“China Jails Man for Teaching Islam Online,” *CBS News*, 12 Sept. 2017.

²⁶Paul Mozur, “One Month, 500,000 Face Scans: How China Is Using A.I. to Profile a Minority,” *The New York Times*, 14 Apr. 2019; Drew Harwell and Eva Dou, “Huawei Tested AI Software That Could Recognize Uighur Minorities and Alert Police, Report Says,” *Washington Post*, 9 Sept. 2022; Tate Ryan-Mosley, “This Huge Chinese Company Is Selling Video Surveillance Systems to Iran,” *MIT Technology Review*, December 15, 2021; Edward Wong and Ana Swanson, “U.S. Aims to Expand Export Bans on China Over Security and Human Rights,” *The New York Times*, 5 July 2022.

²⁷“Wave of Arrests Across Eastern Tibet After Digital Search Operations,” *Free Tibet*, 22 July 2021.

²⁸Nithin Coca, “China’s Digital Wall Around Tibet,” *Coda Story*, 16 May 2019.

²⁹“Five members of the Sion Church in Taiyuan travelled abroad to attend an evangelical conference, and were arrested for ‘the crime of stealing across the border,’” *ChinaAid*, 27 July 2021.

³⁰“China Outlaws Large Underground Protestant Church in Beijing,” *Reuters*, 10 Sept. 2018.

³¹Cooper Quintin and Mona Wang, “Watering Holes and Million Dollar Dissidents: The Changing Economics of Digital Surveillance,” *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, 9 Sept. 2019.

and those in mainland China—to the point where domestic Chinese clergy have asked their members not to use WeChat with Christians in the United States.³²

Second, China is increasingly exporting its surveillance technology to others. As part of its “Digital Silk Road,” the Xi regime has sought to couple its Belt and Road development initiative with a concurrent push to boost foreign sales of Chinese telecommunications equipment and technology, including surveillance technology.³³ As a result, China has now successfully sold the surveillance technology it has pioneered to over 80 states globally,³⁴ many of whom also have extensive legal and bureaucratic structures for religious repression. For example, consider Iran. After widespread protests throughout the country in 2009, Tehran purchased a surveillance system from ZTE for Iran’s telecommunications monopoly, enabling the regime to monitor landline and mobile communications and carry out deep packet inspection across nearly all internet traffic.³⁵ More recently, Tehran has entered into a 25-year trade agreement with China in which Iran will receive greater Chinese investment and technology, while earlier this year Iran’s parliament pushed forward a new Internet “Protection Bill” that would place the country’s internet infrastructure under control of its armed forces and security services and was explicitly modeled in part on Beijing’s approach to internet technology.³⁶ As one lawmaker put it, in reference to internet restrictions and surveillance, “the Chinese have unique and innovative experience in this field, which we can put to use.”³⁷ Iran’s security services have already made progress in that effort, with the purchase of video surveillance systems from the Chinese firm Tiandy—a company notorious for its supply of “smart interrogation desks” and facial recognition systems designed to target ethnic and religious minorities.³⁸ Left unchecked, the Iranian regime appears intent on replicating China’s surveillance system within its borders using Chinese-made technology. Given Tehran’s track record, this poses serious risks to religious freedom in the country.

Third, the Xi regime’s use of digital surveillance for religiously motivated repression has normalized the practice globally. Consider Saudi Arabia. As with China, the Saudi government has leveraged zero-day exploits to surveil and target dissident communities abroad.³⁹ It has also carried out mass surveillance of internet communications and social media within the country, with one key advisor—who was also involved with the killing of Jamal Khashoggi—publicly crowdsourcing a list of dissidents to target using a Twitter hashtag.⁴⁰ Even though the Saudi regime has used Israeli rather than Chinese surveillance tech, and leveraged American rather than Saudi digital platforms, China’s surveillance apparatus has helped to normalize its repression. Not surprisingly, Saudi officials have publicly acknowledged studying Beijing’s technology development and deployment, claiming that “there is a lot to learn from China.”⁴¹

HOW THE UNITED STATES SHOULD RESPOND

As the international community has awoken to the threats posed by China’s model of digital authoritarianism, the United States and its allies and partners have started to respond forcefully. The U.S. Entity List is now far more comprehensive, export controls have been expanded, and new sanctions have been put in place on officials and firms responsible for the worst human rights abuses within China.⁴² Although the full effect of these and related efforts will take time to play out, the

³² Wan Zixin, “China’s Social Media Platforms—Tools of Religious Persecution,” *Bitter Winter*, 19 May 2020.

³³ Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Digital Silk Road: China’s Quest to Wire the World and Win the Future*, Washington, DC: CSIS, 2021.

³⁴ Dahlia Peterson, “How China Harnesses Data Fusion to Make Sense of Surveillance Data,” *Brookings Techstream*, 23 Sept. 2021.

³⁵ “Special Report: Chinese Firm Helps Iran Spy on Citizens,” *Reuters*, 22 Mar. 2012.

³⁶ “Iran: Human Rights Groups Sound Alarm Against Draconian Internet Bill,” *Human Rights Watch*, 17 Mar. 2022.

³⁷ “Iran Plans to Work With China On Technology To Further Restrict Internet,” *Iran International*, 3 Feb. 2022.

³⁸ Tate Ryan-Mosley, “This Huge Chinese Company Is Selling Video Surveillance Systems to Iran,” *MIT Technology Review*, December 15, 2021.

³⁹ Bill Marczak, et al., “The Kingdom Came to Canada: How Saudi-Linked Digital Espionage Reached Canadian Soil,” *Citizen Lab Research Report No. 115*, University of Toronto, 1 Oct. 2018.

⁴⁰ Katie Benner, et al., “Saudis’ Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider,” *The New York Times*, 20 Oct. 2018.

⁴¹ Andrew England and Simeon Kerr, “More of China, Less of America’: How Superpower Fight Is Squeezing the Gulf,” *Financial Times*, 20 Sept. 2021.

⁴² Edward Wong and Ana Swanson, “U.S. Aims to Expand Export Bans on China Over Security and Human Rights,” *The New York Times*, 5 July 2022.

era in which Chinese firms were able to easily and openly develop and export repressive censorship and surveillance technology is drawing to a close—and rightfully so.

However, where the application of China’s surveillance and censorship technology to religious freedom is specifically concerned, there is still far more that can be done. In particular:

- **Establish a temporary, independent commission on digital authoritarianism.** Addressing the challenge that digital authoritarianism poses to freedom of religion will not be possible without a consensus understanding of the threat it poses to the United States and democratic societies more broadly. A new bipartisan commission could carry out a full review of the challenge posed by digital authoritarianism, especially to religious freedom, and offer a consensus set of recommendations for how the United States should respond.
- **Re-organize for the long term.** With digital surveillance and high-tech competition set to be a defining challenge in the years and decades to come, the U.S. government has taken early steps to adapt its bureaucracy for the long-term nature of that challenge. Now that new bodies like the Bureau for Cyberspace and Digital Policy in the State Department have gotten off the ground, there should be an inter-agency review of how the offices set up to address digital policy and security liaise with and inform offices dedicated to religious freedom globally, and vice versa. This may result in more staff in the CDP or EAP bureaus having online religious freedom as part of their portfolio, and/or more staff in USCIRF and elsewhere with tech and digital policy as part of theirs. Regardless of the outcome, however, the Biden administration should mandate a review of how best to organize effectively against digital authoritarianism and religious repression.
- **Create an open-source monitoring function.** Crafting effective policy is difficult without reliable information and analysis, yet right now there is no consistent source of digital surveillance and censorship, much less its impact on religious repression, across the U.S. government. In light of the recommendation above, there should be an office dedicated to regularly providing the public with open-source information about how political regimes are deploying surveillance and censorship technology and what impact it is having on human rights, including the freedom of religion. By reliably producing this information, the United States will also be better positioned to build momentum for global efforts to counter digital authoritarianism in China, Iran, and elsewhere.
- **Link religious freedom with freedom of expression online.** In response to the growing calls for national internets like China’s Great Firewall or Iran’s “Halal web,” the Biden administration rightly reiterated the need for an open and free internet earlier this year with its “Declaration for the Future of the Internet.”⁴³ Yet religion was referenced only once in passing in the declaration, and is often downplayed in broader policy discussions around freedom of expression online—despite the role that religious repression often plays in motivating mass digital surveillance. As the United States advocates for greater internet freedom around the world, its messaging should emphasize that freedom of speech and freedom of religion go hand-in-hand.
- **Leverage privacy-enhancing technologies.** As the scale of government and commercial surveillance has grown, privacy-enhancing technologies hold enormous promise for advancing and protecting democratic values and norms—yet they are often absent from discussions about how to push back on the high-tech surveillance of religion in China and elsewhere.⁴⁴ The U.S. should not only continue to invest more in privacy-enhancing technology, but they should also invest in efforts to educate religious minorities about how to use them. Virtual private networks (VPNs) are particularly valuable here, especially in states—like Saudi Arabia—that seek to emulate China’s surveillance system but do not yet have the technical competence to do so effectively.⁴⁵ With many religious activities shifting online, the need for end-to-end encrypted group video-conference and streaming will be increasingly vital. Although early options like Jitsi and Signal exist, privacy-preserving group video platforms will require far more investment to become easily accessible and usable by religious communities.

⁴³“A Declaration for the Future of the Internet,” *White House*, May 2022.

⁴⁴Andrew Imbrie, et al., “Privacy Is Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, 16 Feb. 2022.

⁴⁵“A Seven-Nation Survey,” Northwestern University in Qatar, 2018.

Hearing Before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China

“Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism”

Tuesday, September 13, 2022

Written Testimony of Dr. Emile Dirks

Postdoctoral Fellow at The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto

Chairman Merkley, Chairman McGovern, and distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to participate.

This testimony draws upon my doctoral research in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, and my postdoctoral research at The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, on the surveillance and control of “target people” viewed by China’s police as threats to social stability and national security, and police-led mass DNA collection programs implemented under the Xi Jinping administration. My testimony today reflects my own views as a researcher, and not necessarily those of The Citizen Lab.

Through my testimony, I wish to make three points concerning the control of religion through digital authoritarianism as they pertain to the policing of practitioners of banned faiths and the peoples of the Tibet Autonomous Region. One, that digital surveillance of practitioners of banned faiths is part of broader systems of police surveillance directed at a range of Chinese citizens viewed as threats to the party-state. Two, that in order for police to make full use of digital surveillance tools aimed at practitioners of banned faiths, China’s police are compelled to collaborate with other local party-state offices. And three, that under the Xi Jinping administration, police-led programs of DNA collection once reserved for criminalized people have now expanded to target entire populations of ethnic and religious minorities, in particular to the people of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Based on these three points, I make two recommendations. One, in order to better understand Chinese state surveillance and repression of religious practitioners, and in order to contribute to informed policy making, the United States government should increase funding to Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese language programs offered at universities and colleges. And two, in order to better understand the effect of Chinese state surveillance and repression on ethnic and religious minorities, and in order to contribute to informed policy responses, the United States government should fund the study at universities and colleges of minority languages spoken in China.

Point One: Digital Surveillance of Practitioners of Banned Faiths

I would like to begin by discussing how China’s police categorize, register, and digitally surveil practitioners of banned faiths. Discussions of policing in China often separate crime control from political repression. My research suggests that, in practice, Chinese police do not draw a clear line between the two. Techniques of digital surveillance and control deployed against criminalized populations like users of drugs, for example, can be easily deployed against people seen as threats to the party-state like activists and petitioners.

Among those Chinese citizens who are targets of both crime control and political repression by China’s police are practitioners of so-called “heterodox” (*xiejiao*) faiths. These faiths are defined by the

Supreme People's Procuratorate as faiths which “falsely use religion or qigong to deceive people, exercise control over their members, and harm society.”¹ Operating outside of China's system of five officially recognized religions, these groups include the Falun Gong, the Church of Almighty God, and the Unification Church, among others. Through the Ministry of Public Security and the Central Leading Group on Preventing and Dealing with Heterodox Faiths, the Chinese government has surveilled and repressed members of these faiths since the 1990s.²

As mentioned, practitioners of banned faiths are only one of many groups subject to state repression and surveillance. Those Chinese citizens perceived as potential threats to social stability or national security are referred to by the Ministry of Public Security as “target people” (*zhongdian renyuan*). Target people is a broad group and can include everyone from users of drugs, to former prison detainees and people in community corrections, to people with mental illnesses, to petitioners, to human rights advocates, to members of ethnic or religious minority communities. These people are among the most marginalized and vulnerable members of Chinese society. The total number of Chinese citizens police have registered as target people is unknown, though it likely runs in the millions. And a key component of day-to-day policing across China is surveilling and occasionally detaining target people.

Among those Chinese citizens registered as target people are practitioners of banned faiths. At the national level, the Ministry of Public Security's 2007 Target Population Management Regulations lists as threats people suspected of participating in the activities of “heterodox faiths” or “using religion” to conduct illegal activities.³ Provincial-level Public Security Bureaus also classify practitioners of banned faiths as target people. The 2010 Zhejiang Public Security Organ Target People Dynamic Control Work Standards lists members of the Falun Gong and “other heterodox faith organizations,” as well as petitioners linked to the Falun Gong and practitioners of banned faiths, as target people.⁴ While Falun Gong practitioners are specifically named in the Zhejiang Standards, we know from reports on local government websites that local police also categorize practitioners of other banned faiths as target people.

It is these local police who are primarily responsible for interpreting directives from national, provincial, and municipal public security organs and identifying practitioners of banned faith in their jurisdiction. Once a practitioner is identified, police add them to databases of target people. These databases first appeared under the Hu Jintao administration (2002–2012), with one of the earliest database systems, the Dynamic Control System, focused on users of drugs.⁵ The techniques of digital record keeping, information sharing, and surveillance developed as part of the Chinese government's

1 “关于办理组织、利用邪教组织破坏法律实施等刑事案件适用法律若干问题的解释” [“Regarding interpretation on several issues concerning the application of law in handling criminal cases such as organizing and using cult organizations to undermine the implementation of the law”], 最高人民法院, January 26, 2017, <https://archive.md/nZ3KH>

2 Cook, S. and Lemish, L., (2011), “The 610 Office: Policing the Chinese Spirit”, Jamestown China Brief, 11(17), <https://archive.md/M4lz4>; Cook, S., (2019), “The Learning Curve: How Communist Party Officials are Applying Lessons from Prior “Transformation” Campaigns to Repression in Xinjiang”, Jamestown China Brief, 19(3), <https://archive.md/CExlv>

3 “公安部重点人口管理规定”

4 “浙江省公安机关重点人员动态管控工作规范（试行）”

5 Dirks, E. and Cook, S., “China's Surveillance State Has Tens of Millions of New Targets”, Foreign Policy, October 21, 2019, <https://archive.md/J8eRO>

repression of users of drugs later became a blueprint for databases used to catalogue and control a wider range of target people, including practitioners of banned faiths.

As a tool of Chinese state surveillance and repression of practitioners of banned faiths, police databases serve two purposes: 1) registering practitioners of banned faiths as target people and storing identifying information on them; and 2) facilitating community-based surveillance of registered individuals.

Data may include the individual's pseudonyms, physical characteristics, economic status, social circle, the areas which they frequent, record of offenses, manner of dress, and details about their faith. In some cases, biometric data, like facial and iris scans and DNA samples, are collected and stored. Based on this information, police can categorize the supposed risk posed by an individual from low to medium to high. Some database systems even allow police to categorize practitioners based on their purported "level of [spiritual] obsession."⁶ It is unclear what guidelines, if any, inform how police grade the purported threat posed by a practitioner of a banned faith. Nor is it clear how a practitioner, once designated as a target person, can be unregistered. The authority to do so appears to rest solely with the police. Given the extensive powers enjoyed by China's police,⁷ it seems possible that local police officers have wide remit to rank and (un)register practitioners of banned faiths however they or their superiors wish.

As a form of state surveillance, these databases can have severe repercussions for registered individuals. Once a practitioner is registered in a police database, their file as a target person is associated with their national ID card. These machine-readable ID cards allow personal data to be stored electronically. National ID cards are often required when conducting various on- and offline commercial transactions, like purchasing train, rail, or bus tickets, or booking a hotel room. The systems through which these commercial transactions are conducted are often connected to police-run database systems.

The integration of commercial and police-run database systems facilitates police surveillance of target people, including practitioners of banned faiths. For example, when a police-registered practitioner books into a hotel through the front desk computer system, local police may be alerted to their presence. On the basis of this information, police can decide to visit the hotel to interrogate, harass, or even detain the individual. By interdicting practitioners at hotels, guesthouses, and transport stations, police place severe restrictions on the ability of practitioners to travel freely and congregate with fellow worshippers. These techniques of control did not originate with the party-state's campaigns of repression against practitioners. Like other aspects of these database systems, the earliest form of these national ID card-linked surveillance systems were deployed against users of drugs in the mid-to-late 2000s.

Likewise, these same forms of surveillance continue to be deployed against a range of target people, including petitioners, human rights activists, and former prison detainees. Evidence from Xinjiang indicates that police have also designated vast numbers of Uyghur and other indigenous individuals as "target people."⁸ And as elsewhere in China, police in Xinjiang have used comparable systems of digital surveillance as part of the Chinese government's campaign of repression against the people of

6 Dirks, E., (2019), "Key Individuals Management' and the Roots of China's Anti-Muslim Surveillance System", Jamestown China Brief, 19(16), <https://archive.md/ZAubi>

7 Lubman, S., "Arrested, Detained: A Guide to Navigating China's Police Powers," Wall Street Journal, August 12, 2014, <https://archive.ph/dqVDE>

the region.⁹ While these surveillance programs are a key aspect of state repression in Xinjiang, my research indicates that the roots of these programs lie outside Xinjiang and predate the current Xi Jinping administration.

Working with minimal external oversight, China's police appear free to use tools of digital surveillance to harass and repress practitioners of banned faiths as they see fit. And by designating practitioners of banned faiths as "target people" – that vast array of Chinese citizens police believe threaten social stability and national security – China's police further criminalize diverse forms of worship and further blur the lines between crime control and political repression.

Point Two: Surveillance of Practitioners Through Police and Party-State Collaboration

This description of the police's digital surveillance of practitioners of banned faiths paints a picture of limitless police powers. Yet discussions of digital authoritarianism risk overestimating how well these technologies work, and underestimating the importance of more prosaic forms of control. My research suggests that in order to surveil practitioners of banned faiths, police are compelled to supplement digital tools with boots-on-the-ground policing and inter-bureaucratic cooperation.

Despite considerable technical advances in China's domestic surveillance capabilities¹⁰, existing systems do not always work as designed. Under the Xi Jinping administration, China's police are collecting ever greater amounts of data from the public. However, the recent leak of files on nearly one billion people from a Shanghai police-run database suggests that persistent issues with data security and accuracy remain.¹¹ What's more, local police are often strapped for time and resources. The Ministry of Public Security enjoys considerable political authority. Yet police capacity is not unlimited. Resource constraints, excessive demands from superiors, and poor pay and working conditions can undermine police performance.¹²

Technical issues and capacity limitations have also hampered the policing of target people, including the policing of practitioners of banned faiths. Police may be able to register practitioners and catalogue them in target people database system. However, police often lack the capacity to control practitioners in the community. There are often too many target people, or too many competing tasks, for the police to do so.

To overcome these challenges, police often rely on the cooperation of other party-state offices – including judicial officers, members of local Political and Legal Affairs Committees, and grid

8 Grose, T., "'Once Their Mental State Is Healthy, They Will Be Able to Live Happily in Society': How China's Government Conflates Uighur Identity with Mental Illness", ChinaFile, August 2, 2019, <https://archive.md/IqrSJ>; Xu, V., Leibold, J., and Impiombato, D., (2021), *The Architecture of Repression: Unpacking Xinjiang's Governance*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, <https://archive.md/STwAq>

9 "China's Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App", Human Rights Watch, May 1, 2019, <https://archive.md/hDGuZ>

10 Batke, J. and Ohlberg, M., "State of Surveillance," ChinaFile, October 30, 2020, <https://archive.ph/MorFp>

11 Arcesati, R. and Hmaid, A., "Shanghai police-database breach exposes lax data protection," MERICS, July 20, 2022, <https://archive.ph/dgrPh>

12 Scoggins, S. and O'Brien, K., (2016), "China's Unhappy Police", *Asian Survey*, 56(2), 225-242; Zang, X. and Pratt, J., (2019), "Are Street-Level Bureaucrats in China Hardnosed Cops or Consultants? An Institutional Account of Policing Behavior in Autocracy", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(116), 232-244; Scoggins, S., (2020), *Policing China: Street-Level Cops in the Shadow of Protest*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)

management personnel – to surveil practitioners in the community. These party-state organs, working alone or with the police, make routine visits to the homes of known practitioners. These home visits play multiple, intersecting roles. Through these visits, party-state officials provide practitioners, many of whom are economically disadvantaged, with limited forms of social assistance, meant to alleviate socio-economic difficulties and demonstrate the party-state's care. Researchers have documented similar dynamics as part of the Chinese government's campaign of repression in Xinjiang.¹³

This approach, however, dates back even further and is rooted in broader shifts in the policing which began in the mid-2000s under the Hu administration. The failure of harsh “strike hard” policing to bring down crime rates led to a readjustment in crime control techniques. Rather than relying on detention alone, authorities adopted mixed approaches that combined repression with social assistance. This included the use of welfare services as a way to dissuade target people from continuing to engage in perceived threatening activities.¹⁴ Such practices have continued and in some cases expanded under the Xi administration.

In some cases, these mixed approaches may have discouraged police from relying on brute force alone to deal with practitioners of banned faiths. Yet in the eyes of the police, practitioners remain potential threats to social stability. And as registered target people, even practitioners who receive social assistance remain targets of extensive state surveillance. In fact, party-state officials' visits to the homes of practitioners double as a form of surveillance and social control. Police and other party-state officials use home visits to search for evidence of ongoing worship or banned religious materials, or to convince practitioners to adhere to China's laws on religious practices. In other cases, authorities enlist the family members of known practitioners to help “educate” and monitor their kin.

These collaborations between the police and other party-state offices can also strengthen the previously discussed forms of digital surveillance. Through meetings with practitioners, party-state officials collect timely information which can be passed on to the police and added to target people databases. Reports sent to the police by other party-state officials or grid management personnel can also be used to reassess risk evaluations for known practitioners, identify leaders among faith congregations or where practitioners gather, and calculate the size of local faith groups. By taking on the task of gathering data for the police, these party-state workers further blur the lines between social support and social control.

The surveillance of practitioners of banned faiths is particularly pronounced during “sensitive periods” (*min'gan shiqi*) which include everything from national holidays like Spring Festival to meetings of the National People's Congress. During sensitive periods, police are put on heightened alert to prevent any incidents which might disrupt social stability and blemish the reputation of local, provincial, or national leaders. This includes tightening surveillance of target people, including practitioners of banned faiths. Police place practitioners on 24 hour surveillance and prevent practitioners from traveling outside their home area. To ensure the movement and activities of practitioners are thoroughly limited during sensitive periods, police rely heavily on the target people databases and national ID card-linked

13 Byler, D., “China's Government Has Ordered a Million Citizens to Occupy Uighur Homes. Here's What They Think They're Doing.”, ChinaFile, October 24, 2018, <https://archive.md/yyswg>; Xu, V., Leibold, J., and Impiombato, D., (2021), *The Architecture of Repression: Unpacking Xinjiang's Governance*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, <https://archive.md/STwAq>

14 Pan, J., *Welfare for Autocrats: How Social Assistance in China Cares for Its Rulers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

surveillance systems previously discussed. And in cases where police believe practitioners pose a pronounced threat to social stability, police will detain them in extrajudicial black jails or in pretrial detention centres, where they are often subjected to torture and abuse.¹⁵

Police collaboration with other party-state offices to surveil practitioners of banned faiths in the community points to the limits of police capacity. Despite considerable authority, few external checks on their activities, and access to advanced forms of digital surveillance, local police are not all powerful. In order to surveil and control practitioners of banned faiths, police rely heavily on the cooperation of other party-state offices. These collaborations not only supplement local police capacity. They also transform other party-state officials into informants for the police, thereby strengthening police-run target people databases and national ID card-linked surveillance systems.

Point Three: Police-Led Mass DNA Collection in the Tibet Autonomous Region

Thus far, I have discussed features of policing religious minorities which have their roots in the Hu Jintao administration. These practices have continued under Xi Jinping, but they did not begin under his rule. There is, however, a particular form of surveillance which is unique to the Xi era. And that is the mass collection of biometric data from entire populations. Moving away from the discussion on police surveillance of practitioners of banned faiths, I would now like to discuss police-led mass DNA collection programs targeting entire populations of ethnic and religious minorities, and in particular the people of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Like many countries around the world, China's police operate forensic DNA databases. Data stored in these databases are usually taken during the course of criminal or forensic investigations.¹⁶ However, we know that police also collect DNA samples from people not accused of any particular criminal offense. These individuals include many target people like practitioners of banned faiths. Under the Xi Jinping administration, however, police DNA collection has expanded beyond criminal suspects, victims, and target people to include entire populations. This has included a national program to collect DNA samples from between 5-10% of China's male population, or between 35-70 million people.¹⁷ Furthermore, for years researchers have known that authorities in Xinjiang have collected extensive biometric data – including DNA samples, iris and facial scans, and vocal and finger prints – from the region's people. Such programs rest on the authority's assumption that Uyghurs and other indigenous people could pose a threat to social stability, based solely on their ethnicity or religious convictions.¹⁸

Forensic scientists in China – often working in collaboration with the police – have also conducted genetic research concerning ethnic minority peoples. In 2017, the academic journal *Human Genetics*

15 Cook, S., (2017), *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*, Freedom House, <https://archive.ph/AxiAI>

16 Benmotaite, A., (2020), "Building of the World's Largest DNA Database: The China Case," in P. Shrivastava, H. Ranjan Dash, J. A. Lorente, and J. Imam (eds.), *Forensic DNA Typing: Principles, Applications and Advancements*, (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 639-658

17 Dirks, E. and Leibold, J., (2020), *Genomic Surveillance: Inside China's DNA Dragnet*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, <https://archive.ph/ItUSD>

18 "China: Police DNA Database Threatens Privacy," Human Rights Watch, May 15, 2017, <https://archive.ph/CA4b9>; Wee, S., "China Uses DNA to Track Its People, With the Help of American Expertise," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2019, <https://archive.ph/6itC1>; Leibold, J., (2019), "Surveillance in China's Xinjiang Region: Ethnic Sorting, Coercion, and Inducement," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 121(29), pp. 46-60; Wee, S. and Mozur, P., "China Uses DNA to Map Faces, With Help From the West," December 3, 2019, <https://archive.ph/vkwDK>

published an article on genetic diversity based on nearly 38,000 DNA samples collected by police-affiliated researchers from men, many of whom were Tibetan and Uyghur. The resulting pressure from academics led to the journal retracting the article in 2021. Incidents like this have raised concerns about the role some Chinese researchers have played in state surveillance of non-Han people.¹⁹

My research on a police-led program of mass DNA collection in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) shows how police-led biometric surveillance programs operate in areas populated by ethnic and religious minorities.²⁰ Since 2016, police in the TAR have collected DNA samples from men, women, and children, outside of an ongoing criminal investigation. None of those people targeted for DNA collection appear to be criminal suspects or to belong to any particular category of target people, like users of drugs or petitioners. Police have collected DNA from people in fields, homes, schools, businesses, construction sites, and monasteries. Police have also targeted Buddhist monks for DNA collection, unsurprising given the long history of state surveillance and repression of the region's religious practitioners. And in other cases, police have collected DNA samples from children as young as elementary school age.

This multi-year campaign appears to cover the entirety of the TAR. My analysis suggests that police have engaged in mass DNA collection in all seven of the TAR's regions. Some public records provide precise figures for the number of DNA samples police have collected in a given area. These scale of data collection is striking. A February 2017 report from Zhagyab County indicated that police had collected more than 25,000 DNA samples, representing nearly half of Zhagyab's entire population. A January 2021 report from Qushui County in Lhasa suggested that authorities had collected DNA samples from nearly 10% of Lhasa's entire population.

The true size of the mass DNA database being built by police in the TAR is unknown. However, the aforementioned sources and other publicly available sources allow us to estimate its potential size. Based on my calculations, between June 2016 and July 2022, police may have collected DNA samples from between one quarter and one third of the TAR's population of 3.66 million, or between roughly 919,000 and 1.2 million DNA samples. If DNA collection continues, the final size of a finished mass DNA database may be even greater.

Police have provided a variety of justifications for this program, including fighting crime, finding lost people, and securing social stability. It is not clear which – if any – of these justifications reflects the primary motivation behind the campaign. As of yet, no single publicly accessible document is available to explain the true intentions, history, scope, and character of this police-led program of mass DNA collection. However, without external checks on police powers, police will be free to use the database for whatever purpose they see fit. DNA collection takes place alongside the collection of more extensive information, known as “basic information” (*jichu xinxi*), which can include everything from banking information, a person's known social circle, and work and family history. A completed mass DNA database, covering a portion of the TAR's population and combined with more extensive population data, could become a powerful tool in the arsenal of China's police to surveil and repress the indigenous people of Tibet.

19 Moureau, Y., “Crack down on genomic surveillance,” *Nature*, December 3, 2019, <https://archive.ph/cz8nx>; Hvistendahl, M., “Mass resignations at scientific journal over ethically fraught China genetics paper,” *The Intercept*, August 4, 2021, <https://archive.ph/OBj4l>

20 Dirks, E., “Mass DNA Collection in the Tibet Autonomous Region from 2016–2022,” *The Citizen Lab*, September 13, 2022, <https://archive.ph/VCSJj>

This program of mass DNA collection signals an escalation in state surveillance of ethnic and religious minority communities in China under the Xi Jinping administration. Researchers have known for years about how authorities in Xinjiang have conducted a program of mass biometric data collection targeting the region's Uyghur and other indigenous people. My research suggests that a similar police-led campaign of mass DNA collection has been ongoing in the Tibet Autonomous Region since 2016. Given the history of Chinese state surveillance and repression of the indigenous people of Tibet, and the virtually unchecked power of China's police, it is likely that this program of mass DNA collection will become one more tool of social control wielded by the Chinese state against ethnic and religious minorities.

Recommendations

My testimony today has highlighted three key components of Chinese state surveillance and repression of religious and ethnic minority communities in China: that practitioners of banned faiths are surveilled alongside other "target people;" that police collaborate with other party-state offices to surveil these practitioners; and that police are now engaged in a mass DNA collection program targeting the indigenous people of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

These programs of digital surveillance, inter-bureaucratic cooperation, and mass biometric data collection targeting China's religious minority communities are well-documented, both by myself and other researchers. However, it is only through the careful analysis of primary sources that researchers have been able to document these programs. And analysis of these primary sources is only possible if researchers are capable of reading Chinese.

Language proficiency is therefore fundamental to informed analysis and, by extension, informed and effective policy making. However, according to some reports, the study of foreign languages at U.S. universities and colleges is declining.²¹ This includes enrollment in Chinese studies, which have reportedly been dropping since the late 2010s.²² While declining enrollment in Chinese language programs is attributable to numerous factors, it suggests a worrying disengagement from the world beyond the United States' borders. If this trend is not reversed, it could have negative long-term consequences on the United States government's capacity to understand China's party-state, including Chinese state surveillance and repression of religious practitioners, and craft effective policies in response.

Therefore, my recommendations to the Commission are as follows:

One: in order to deepen the United States government's understanding of Chinese state surveillance and repression of China's religious practitioners and ethnic and religious minority communities, and in order to develop informed and effective policies in response, the United States government should increase federal funding for Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese language programs at universities and colleges. Increased funding for these programs would help train new researchers capable of analyzing timely developments in Chinese state activities, including the surveillance and repression of religious practitioners. The work of these researchers would in turn

²¹ Flaherty, C., "L'œuf ou la Poule?," Inside Higher Ed, March 19, 2018, <https://archive.ph/mKqal>

²² Mooney, P., "American students lose interest in China studies," Nikkei Asia, April 15, 2017, <https://archive.ph/ZWIII>

contribute to informed and effective policy making pertaining to the United States relationship with China, as well as to the important ongoing work of this Commission.

Two: in order to deepen the United States government’s understanding of the effect of Chinese state surveillance and repression on religious and ethnic minority communities, and in order to develop informed and effective policies in response, the United States government should increase federal funding for language programs at universities and colleges focused on minority languages spoken in China. These minority languages include Uyghur, Mongolian, Kazakh, and various Tibetan languages and dialects, among others. Increasing funding to the study of minority languages spoken in China would signal the United States government’s willingness to defend the rights and interests of China’s diverse language communities, a subject covered in a previous hearing by the Commission.²³ Increased funding would also help train researchers capable of understanding the impact of Chinese state policies on ethnic and religious minority communities, and communicating this understanding to policy makers, including members of this Commission. This in turn would contribute to more informed and effective policy making pertaining to the United States government’s relationship with China and China’s diverse peoples.

Increased funding for language studies will lay a strong foundation for future research into Chinese state programs, including the control of religion through digital authoritarianism.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions and comments.

²³ “Growing Constraints on Language and Ethnic Identity in Today’s China”, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, April 5, 2022, <https://archive.ph/Jz7JT>

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SENATOR MERKLEY

Good morning. Today's hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China entitled "Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism" will come to order.

Before we turn to the subject of this hearing, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank President Biden for his recent appointment of five executive branch commissioners to this Commission. This marks the first time in nearly six years that the Commission includes executive branch commissioners. Their appointment will bolster our ability to bring the expertise and perspective of the various branches of government in our work monitoring human rights and the rule of law in China. As we develop recommendations for legislative, executive, and international action, dialogue to coordinate our efforts will be critical, as it has been in recent years in implementing legislation this Commission spearheaded such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, and more.

I look forward to working closely with our new commissioners. Those commissioners are Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink, Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Marisa Lago, Undersecretary of Labor for International Affairs Thea Lee, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Lisa Peterson, and Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya.

Welcome to our new commissioners. We are absolutely delighted to have you.

Today, our hearing focuses on freedom of religion, particularly recent developments in Chinese authorities' use of technology to crack down on the free exercise of religion. While many of our hearings explore violations of religious freedom—in Xinjiang, Tibet, and elsewhere—this is our first hearing dedicated to this topic since 2018.

Recent Chinese Communist Party steps to use digital repression to strengthen control of religion make this an especially timely hearing. As more religious activity and resources move online, especially in response to COVID, Chinese officials have expanded use of digital tools to surveil and suppress online religious expression. Invasive surveillance technologies and mass biometric data collection track and monitor religious groups that authorities deem to be a threat. In March of this year, new Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services went into effect, which require a government-issued permit to post religious content online and ban the online broadcasting of religious ceremonies, rites, and services, among a host of other restrictions infringing on Chinese citizens' freedom of religion.

These measures control how individuals and communities worship, with the aim of "sinicizing" religion to conform with Party priorities. As we will hear today, those priorities are political and social control. To achieve that control, Chinese authorities cite objectives like combating control and countering so-called "religious extremism" as they undermine fundamental human rights. The recent UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Xinjiang report calls this what it is: a pretext that conflates personal religious choice with extremism and leads to severe human rights abuses.

Our first witness today is one of the most powerful voices in the world when it comes to exposing these abuses and advocating for those who simply wish to exercise their basic rights, and so I'm honored that Nury Turkel is here with us. After we hear his perspective, our second panel of eminent experts will help us understand the tools of digital surveillance and repression, the risks of this model of authoritarian management of religion spreading to other countries, and recommendations for how defenders of religious freedom can respond. I look forward to our witnesses' testimony.

 PREPARED STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE MCGOVERN

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to our witnesses.

Religious freedom has been at the core of the Commission's work since its founding. I appreciate your scheduling this hearing on this important topic.

The Chinese government's record on religious freedom is as atrocious as it is well documented, including by this Commission and by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, whose chair we are honored to have as a witness today.

In our thoughts today are the prisoners of conscience who have had their religious liberty violated by the Chinese government. It is our moral responsibility to help them tell their stories, and those of the people whose voices do not reach us.

Today's hearing will focus on new and insidious methods authorities are using to exert control over religious practice, including online regulation and digital surveillance technologies.

The UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief last year reported that the Chinese government reportedly uses "biometrics, digital surveillance and personal data for behavioral analysis for identifying 'extremist' or 'unhealthy thought.'" He notes that such technologies used in "counter-terrorism" contexts threaten freedom of thought.

This aligns with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' recent report on Xinjiang which explained how Chinese officials misused "counter-terrorism" policy to brutally repress Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims and deny their ability to practice their religion and cultural heritage.

This shows how the right to freedom of religion intersects with other fundamental rights—the freedoms of speech and association, equal protection, due process, presumption of innocence—all of which are protected under international human rights law. In this light, I hope the witnesses will expand on the meaning of "Sinicization" of religion—a process to coerce religious believers' allegiance to the state and the Party.

We also want to understand how "Sinicization" manipulates the teaching of religious principles to imply that they support the Party's ideology. It appears the Party is exploiting religion as a means to impose social control.

Last month, a group of UN experts, including the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, issued a statement against the "cynical abuse of religion or belief as a tool of discrimination, hostility and violence," and noted that "[i]nternational law rejects any attempt to call on either religion or belief, or freedom of religion or belief, as justification for the destruction of the rights and freedoms of others."

USCIRF shows that the United States seeks to be a leader in promoting international religious freedom. To be effective, however, we must live up to the standards we demand of other countries. We lack credibility in criticizing China for using religion as a pretext to restrict other liberties if our own governments, including at the state level, engage in the same behavior.

Two final points. One, while China officially recognizes only five religions, our analysis and advocacy must recognize that there is a stunningly wide array of religious beliefs, and non-belief, in the country. PRC regulation harms not only religious freedom but its diversity, too.

Lastly, as China suffers from a devastating heat wave, I am interested in how restrictions on religion undermine the cause of environmental protection, given the links between spirituality and nature within Buddhism and Daoism, for example.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to the testimony.

SUBMISSIONS FOR THE RECORD

FREEDOM HOUSE STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IS ONE OF THE WORST VIOLATORS
OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

Freedom House research has tracked 16 straight years of decline in freedom and democracy around the world, with 2021 seeing the fewest number of countries with net improvements during that period. Nearly 42 percent of the world's population now lives in countries that faced a deterioration in rights in 2021.

Unfortunately, worsening conditions for religious freedom are a component of this deepening democratic recession, with the global average score for our religious freedom indicator declining by 5.4 percent over the last 16 years. State repression of religious minorities and attacks by nonstate actors were the most common driver of the decline in religious freedom, trends borne out in the types of attacks we see in the emergency support we provide to individuals under threat for their religious views.¹

The Chinese Communist Party is one of the worst violators of religious freedom today. Controls over religion in China have increased since 2012, seeping into new areas of daily life and triggering growing resistance from believers. A 2017 report published by Freedom House found that at least 100 million people—nearly one-third of estimated believers in China—belonged to religious groups facing “high” or “very high” levels of persecution (Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong).² Most of these communities face as bad, or worse, persecution today than they did five years ago. Religious believers and activists on behalf of the rights of ethnic minorities continue to be key targets for high-tech surveillance and prosecution for what they write on applications like WeChat. Freedom House has documented multiple cases of Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Falun Gong practitioners who have been sentenced to prison for writing about issues related to their culture or faith on that app.

Conditions for religious believers in China occur within a broader context of increased authoritarianism and declining freedom in China. Over the past decade, repression in China has gone from bad to worse. Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution. In 2014, China had a Freedom in the World score of 17; by 2022, that had dropped to nine. China ranks 193rd out of 210 countries and territories. Tibet ties for dead last. In 2011, China, the world's largest surveillance state, had a Freedom on the Net score of 17; this year, it's a 10, making it the lowest scoring country in our net freedom index for the seventh year in a row. These are dramatic rates of decline for that period of time—nearly 50 percent.

CHINA'S PERSECUTION OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Most well-known in a long list of violations are the widespread crimes against humanity and acts of genocide that have been committed against Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and forced labor facilities, which reportedly detain more than one million men, women, and children at any given time. The abuses being perpetrated against the Uyghurs are, unfortunately, only part of the story. Some officials now working in the Uyghur region fine-tuned their tactics by first targeting Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners,³ and, for decades religious believers including Christians have suffered torture and abuse.

As China experiences a spiritual revival across a wide range of faiths, the Chinese government's religious controls have taken different forms for different localities, ethnicities, and denominations. Over the past five years and especially during the pandemic, in addition to the worsening atrocities committed against Turkic Muslims, communities in other parts of China like Falun Gong practitioners, have faced intensified repression, reversing a slight lull in the aggressiveness of the CCP's campaign against the group in the early years of Xi Jinping's leadership. Falun Gong

¹ Annie Boyajian USCIRF Testimony “Leveraging Targeted Sanctions in Defense of Religious Freedom”, 10/21/2021.

² *Ibid.*

³ <https://jamestown.org/program/the-learning-curve-how-communist-party-officials-are-applying-lessons-from-prior-transformation-campaigns-to-repression-in-xinjiang/>

believers across China, including some with relatives in the United States, face large-scale arbitrary detention, torture, and at times, death from abuse in custody.

Catholics who worship outside of state-sanctioned parameters continue to face reprisals and pressure from Chinese security forces, despite a 2018 agreement on the appointment of bishops between the Vatican and Beijing.

One trend that deserves greater attention is the precarious situation for religious freedom in Hong Kong. Following adoption of the National Security Law two years ago, we have seen a wide range of rights suppressed, resulting in dozens of prosecutions. Now and over the coming year, the authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing may be turning their sights on religious communities.

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY’S USE OF THE INTERNET TO OPPRESS BELIEVERS

Conditions for internet users in China remain profoundly oppressive, confirmed by the country’s status as the world’s worst abuser of internet freedom for the seventh consecutive year. Ordinary users continue to face severe legal repercussions for activities like sharing news stories, talking about their religious beliefs, or communicating with family members and others overseas. The CCP has tightened its control over the state bureaucracy, the media, online speech, religious groups, and civil society associations.⁴

The regime frequently censors cultural and religious content that it deems undesirable. Content related to marginalized ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups is restricted. Keywords related to Falun Gong consistently appear on leaked lists of prohibited terms. Reference to the banned Church of the Almighty God are also reportedly marked as politically sensitive by censors employed by mobile phone services, with users facing account deactivation for sharing religious information. Following the coronavirus outbreak in January 2020, reports emerged of Christian congregations being prevented from conducting live-streamed meetings and of individual parishioners being compelled to delete religious imagery from their social media accounts. However, censorship is not reciprocal. Amid the human rights crisis in Xinjiang, Uyghur-language content and relevant news reporting have been heavily censored and many ordinary Uyghur users detained, while Islamophobic commentary is permitted to circulate widely.

In March 2020, new rules called the Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem came into effect. These provisions place online content in three categories: encouraged positive content, discouraged negative content, and illegal content. The illegal category includes terrorist and obscene content, as well as information “harming the nation’s honor and interests,” “subverting” the CCP regime, or challenging the government’s social, ethnic, religious, or economic policies. New regulations jointly released by five state organs on December 21 banned the transmission of religious content online in China without a government license. Authorities in Qinghai province (where a fifth of the population is Tibetan) have banned Tibetan social media groups tied to religion. The new regulations call for the “Sinicization” of religion, in which the Party leads all religious communities and controls religious-based content.⁵

Members of persecuted religious and ethnic minority groups also tend to face especially harsh punishment for their online activities. Prominent rights defenders and members of ethnic minorities or banned religious groups have received the longest sentences, often exceeding 10 years. A leaked Chinese government document with details of dozens of Uyghurs and other Muslims jailed or taken away for reeducation in Xinjiang that was made public in February 2020 included in its list someone who was friends on WeChat with a Uyghur in Turkey, an individual who accidentally clicked on an overseas website on their phone, and a woman sentenced in August 2017 to 15 years in prison for making contact online with Uyghurs outside the country. Also that month, four Tibetan monks⁶ were sentenced to up to 20 years in prison after police discovered a phone containing records of communication with fellow monks in Nepal and donations for earthquake relief. These are harsher punishments than a defendant might receive for violent crimes like sexual assault or manslaughter in some countries.⁷

These prosecutions are facilitated by the Chinese regime’s extensive and sophisticated surveillance systems. Direct surveillance of internet and mobile phone communications is pervasive, and privacy protections under Chinese law are minimal. In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly moved toward big-data inte-

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2021/global-drive-control-big-tech>

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-media-bulletin>

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/06/china-tibetan-monks-harshly-sentenced>

⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>

gration with the help of private companies, essentially consolidating in various databases a wide array of information on individuals, including their internet and mobile phone activities, with known members of ethnic and religious minorities being a high priority target.⁸ Residents of Xinjiang are subject to severely invasive surveillance tactics and both Uyghurs and Tibetans face heightened monitoring even when traveling in other parts of China.

CHINA'S ROLE IN SUPPRESSING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ABROAD

The Chinese government's violations of religious freedom are also not contained within its borders. According to Freedom House's research, the authoritarian regime in China conducts the world's most sophisticated, comprehensive, and far-reaching campaign of transnational repression in the world.⁹ It was responsible for 229 of the 735 incidents of physical transnational repression that Freedom House recorded between 2014 and 2021, targeting people on every inhabited continent and in at least 36 countries. Mirroring the patterns of its repression at home, the CCP has targeted individual dissidents, their family members, and entire ethnic and religious groups, including Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongolians, and Falun Gong practitioners. The CCP has also abused Interpol's systems to have false notices issued for believers, resulting in their detention or even deportation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As democracies around the world, including the United States, grapple with how to address the threats and challenges undemocratic rulers pose to global rights and freedoms, it is important that attention be given to how to better protect freedom of religion or belief. Steps to better protect against China's repression of religious freedom, both at home and abroad include:

1. In all meetings with Chinese officials, raise human rights and religious freedom issues, including the names of political and religious prisoners. Request information or specific action related to their medical condition and treatment. This should include both prisoners who are a priority nationally, as well as prisoners detained within the geographic boundaries or for subjects that fall within the thematic responsibility of the Chinese official with whom you are meeting. This is especially relevant on travel to China, when dealing with state or CCP officials at the provincial or municipal level or those in policy areas like education or ethnic minorities. Make this routine practice for STAFFDELS and CODELS, and press the executive branch to have U.S. officials across all agencies at all levels raise these issues, including the president.
2. Strategically expand targeted sanctions geographically and higher up the CCP hierarchy, including on officials who have committed or been complicit in the abuse, torture, or persecution of religious believers. Freedom House commends the U.S. government for the targeted sanctions applied to Chinese and Hong Kong officials to date. Penalizing violators of human rights and religious freedom through the blocking of visas and freezing of U.S.-based assets is an effective way to deter future abuses and ensure that these individuals face some measure of justice. Targeted sanctions should be applied to violators of religious freedom as impactfully as possible and should be part of a robust, comprehensive strategy that employs a full range of coordinated diplomatic and policy actions. As part of this comprehensive strategy, policymakers should seek to avoid unintended consequences for religious minorities in the implementation of foreign policy initiatives.
3. Ensure robust implementation and enforcement of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) and urge other countries to adopt similar measures. The UFLPA prohibited the importation of products made in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—where forced labor is notorious and rampant—unless the importer can prove that forced labor was not used in the creation of their products. It also required the imposition of sanctions on those involved in human rights abuses related to forced labor and the creation of a strategy to ensure that goods made with forced labor in China do not enter the United States. Congress should work with the executive branch to ensure sufficient funding for these efforts, timely creation and implementation of the strategy, and robust enforcement of the provisions related to sanctions and import bans.

⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/21/china-xinjiang-surveillance-state-police-targets/>

⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/united-states>



**United States House of Representatives
Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

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In accordance with Rule XI, clause 2(g) of the Rules of the House of Representatives, witnesses are asked to disclose the following information. Please complete this form and attach it to your written testimony and it may be made publicly available in electronic format.

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Witness Biographies

Nury Turkel, Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Nury Turkel is the first U.S.-educated Uyghur-American lawyer, foreign policy expert, and human rights advocate. He was born in a re-education camp at the height of China's tumultuous Cultural Revolution and spent the first several months of his life in detention with his mother. He came to the United States in 1995 as a student and was later granted asylum by the U.S. Government. Since June 2022, Nury has served as the Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, having been reappointed by Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) in May of 2022 for a two-year term. He is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He serves as the Chairman of the Board for the Uyghur Human Rights Project, which he co-founded in 2003. Previously, he served as the president of the Uyghur American Association, where he led efforts to raise the profile of the Uyghur people in the United States.

Karrie Koesel, Associate Professor, University of Notre Dame

Karrie J. Koesel is an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame where she specializes in the study of contemporary Chinese and Russian politics, authoritarianism, and religion and politics. She is the author of *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict and the Consequences* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and co-editor of *Citizens & the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China & Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Professor Koesel is a Fellow in the Public Intellectuals Program at the National Committee on US-China Relations. She served as a member of the International Diffusion and Cooperation of Authoritarian Regimes (IDCAR) research network; an associate scholar of the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University; and a researcher for the Under Caesar's Sword project at the University of Notre Dame. Before joining the ND faculty, she taught at the University of Oregon.

Chris Meserole, Director of Research, Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology Initiative, Brookings Institution

Chris Meserole is Research Director of the Brookings Institution's Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technology Initiative and a Fellow in the Brookings Foreign Policy program. Meserole is an expert on artificial intelligence, emerging technology, and global security. His research is currently focused on the increasing exploitation of digital technology by authoritarian regimes and violent non-state actors. He is the co-author of an early report on how Russia and China are exporting digital authoritarianism and has testified before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on the digital repression of religious minorities in China. He also co-led the inaugural working group on recommendation algorithms and violent extremism for the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism and has served on the independent advisory council of the Christchurch Call. Meserole has an academic background in interpretable machine learning and computational social science. His work has appeared or been featured in *The New Yorker*, *New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Wired*, and other publications.

Emile Dirks, Postdoctoral Fellow, Citizen Lab

Emile Dirks is a postdoctoral fellow at The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on the policing of so-called "target people," Chinese citizens whom the Ministry of Public Security views as threats to social stability and national security, as well as police-led mass DNA collection and surveillance programs implemented under the Xi Jinping administration. Two of his most recent publications concern a national program to collect DNA samples from tens of millions of Chinese men and boys, and a mass DNA collection program targeting men, women, and children across the Tibet Autonomous Region.

