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‘Uyghur’ or ‘Muslim’? Identity Development Among Uyghur Diasporas: A Case Study of Kyrgyzstan and Turkey

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative analysis of two Uyghur diasporas in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. It examines the identity development of the Uyghurs while elaborating on the key issues of ethnic identity, its external and internal contestation and negotiation. This aims to answer the following research questions: What are the identities of Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey? How, if at all, have these identities been changing since the collapse of the Soviet Union? And how do Uyghurs balance the notions of ethnicity, nationalism, religion and possibly political ideology? To examine identity development of Uyghurs in Turkey, I rely on primary data collected through participant observation and informal interviews with Uyghur refugees from China. For Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan, I mostly rely on primary data collected through surveys and interviews. This study finds that both diasporas have strong ethnic nationalist sentiments. Yet, in Kyrgyzstan, Muslim (for some, Salafi Muslim) identity is replacing the formerly primary role of ethnic identity.

Keywords: Uyghur; Turkey; Kyrgyzstan; identity; ethnic nationalism; religion

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Uyghurs are ‘Turkic-speaking Muslims’ (Brophy, 2016: 1) whose historical homeland coincides with the Chinese region of Xinjiang (also known variously as East Turkestan or Uyghurstan, depending on the speaker. Since 1949, repressive policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have forced thousands of Uyghur families to leave their motherland and seek refuge in other parts of the globe. This has created Uyghur diasporas in Central Asia and Turkey, with significant numbers also residing in Russia, Europe and the United States (Shichor, 2009). As a result of being divided by state borders, the history of the Uyghurs has been separated as well (Brophy, 2016).

There is plenty of literature on the Uyghurs of China, yet little is written about Uyghur diasporas. This research is a comparative analysis of two diasporas: ‘Turkish Uyghurs’—Uyghur residents of Turkey who immigrated there from China in the last 20 years, and ‘post-Soviet Uyghurs who immigrated in the 50s and 60s, using the case study of the Uyghur diaspora in Kyrgyzstan, with a closer ethnographic study of the latter. By researching these two communities, I seek to contribute to the studies of Uyghur people living outside China.

The historical division of Uyghur people could not help but result in some differences in mentality, language and culture. For instance, while Uyghur language is the first language of members of Uyghur diaspora in Turkey, most Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan are more fluent in Russian than Uyghur language. Other differences can include such issues as social interactions and norms. Interactions between men and women are more restricted in case of “Turkish Uyghurs.” They tend to be more segregated than in the case of Kyrgyzstan. One of the differences between social norms that exist in two communities is presenting flowers. Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan will never present even number of flowers, because they are reserved only for funerals. However, this norm does not have its origins in Uyghur customs. That is why it is not practiced by members of Uyghur diaspora in Turkey. In general, these and other differences exist due to strong impact of Russian culture on peoples of Central Asia.

Soviet policies promoting the idea of the ‘Soviet man’ largely led to the ‘sovietization’ of Uyghurs living within the USSR, leading to ‘[R]ussian mindedness and relatively secular attitudes of most [Soviet] Uyghurs’ (Hofer, 2009: 5). In the early 2000s, Islam was a marker of ethnic identity rather than a religious commitment for the majority of Uyghurs. The main demonstration of their attachment to Islam was the celebration of religious ceremonies related to weddings or funerals. This challenges the primordial theory of nationalism, popular in the 1970s, which argues

that ethnicity (and thus ethnic nationalism) is attached to the child from the moment of birth, and which thus views ethnicity as fixed, non-changing and constant (Isajiw, 1992).

Yet, despite some differences, ethnic Uyghurs in both Kyrgyzstan and Turkey have long had a strong sense of nationalism and self-determination. Uyghurs have aspired to independence and a sovereign Uyghur state (Olson, 2015) Uyghurstan or East Turkestan or to at least be able to freely practice their religion, speak their language and express their culture within an autonomous region. Uyghurs in post-Soviet Central Asia (taking the case of Kyrgyzstan) use the word ‘Vatan’ (from Arabic, meaning ‘motherland’) to refer to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). According to Hojer (2009: 2), ‘[the] Uyghur issue is at the heart of Uyghur’s self-understanding’, resulting in a strong sense of ethnic nationalism.

Uyghur nationalism emerged at the beginning of the last century ‘under the ethnonyms Uyghur or Turkic’ (Kurmangalieva & Konuralp, 2017: 50). In the 20th century, Uyghur nationalism was described as ‘state and cultural nationalism’ (53) and having been about ‘national liberation and self-determination’ (44) with the major purpose of the politically-minded ‘Uyghur nationalist movement’(50) being the creation of the sovereign Uyghurstan or *Sherqiy Türkistan* (East Turkestan).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and accelerated neoliberal globalization, peoples, including Uyghurs, began to define themselves differently. Modernist scholars argue that transnationalism and globalization have broken the notions of ethnicity and nation. They affirm that the movement of people, information, ideas and products around the world have ‘unleashed people from the moorings of localism’ (Roberts, 2004: 86) which is a foundation of ethnic and national identity. This has broken down the conventional ways in which individuals identified themselves. Modernity has changed the world in such a way that ‘the past is stripped away, the place loses its significance, the community loses its hold, objective moral norms vanish, and what remains is simply the self’ (Wells,1999: 66). Consequently, modernists argue, people lose their identity at the individual level, which leads to the blurring of collective identity.

However, modernist scholars overlook the strong bonds and political mobilization that are present in many diasporas. In fact, diaspora activities are not constrained even by state borders. Multiple works acknowledge that diasporas engage in human rights advocacy, charity and other ‘cross-border transnational political action’ (Chaudhary& Moss, 2019:1). In fact, rich diasporas with strong ethnic identities and institutions have been quite successful in promoting their agendas

both in kin- and host states (King& Melvin, 1999–2000: 132). For this reason, this paper uses Adamson and Demetriou's definition of diaspora as a social collectivity that exists across state borders and that has succeeded overtime to:

- 1) sustain a collective national, cultural or religious identity through a sense of internal cohesion and sustained ties with a real or imagined homeland and;
- 2) display an ability to address the collective interests of members of the social collectivity through a developed internal organizational framework and transnational links (2007: 497).

The purpose of this work is to answer the following research question: What are the identities of Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey, taking globalization and modernity into account. I also pose the following sub-questions: How, if at all, have these identities been changing since the collapse of the Soviet Union? And how do Uyghurs balance the notions of ethnicity, religion and possibly political ideology? By posing these questions, I test two hypotheses: The first suggests that ethnic identity among Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan is strong, but that for some, Muslim (sometimes Salafi) identity is supplanting ethnicity as the primary dimension of identity. In Turkey, on the contrary, Muslim identity is viewed as an inherent part of Uyghur ethnic identity. The second hypothesis suggests that there is an association between one's age and attitude towards religion and ethnic nationalism among the Uyghur diaspora in Kyrgyzstan.

For this study, I conducted 30 informal interviews with Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan, allowing the participants to talk freely about their experience, behaviour, feelings and/or attitudes. 'Informal interviews are ideal to elicit emic (insider's perspective) data and get "inside the head" or obtain the worldview thoughts and experiences of the informant' (Bailey, 2000: 116). As the questions discussed were quite sensitive, not all answers were mandatory.

The interviews were also supplemented by a survey asking respondents to react to statements on a Likert scale of 1–5, where 1 meant 'totally disagree' and 5 meant 'totally agree' with the statement. There were 135 respondents from the Bishkek and Karabalta areas – two Kyrgyz regions with sizeable Uyghur population. The respondents were selected via snowball sampling so as to access potential participants that would otherwise be hard to find. The sample was restricted to Uyghur people with Kyrgyz citizenship who reside in the Kyrgyz Republic. Around one third (32%) of respondents were born in China, while two thirds (68%) were born within the former Soviet Union. Of the respondents, 43% were men and 57% were women. Only 15% of the respondents live in areas with few Uyghurs; 85% live in areas densely populated by

ethnic Uyghurs. The age division was as following: 16–24 (14%), 25–34 (13%), 35–49 (30%), 50–64 (24%), and 65 and over (19%). Limitations of this sample include the unwillingness of non-active members to participate in the survey and low literacy rates among older respondents. In addition, some ultra-religious Muslim men would not meet or talk with a female interviewer. To counter this, an electronic version of the questionnaire was sent to the subject. However, it did not work in every case, and some questionnaires were not returned.

For the study of the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey, I used a qualitative approach as there were virtually no resources or information available that would allow for a survey to be conducted. I attended a conference and a three-day youth workshop in Istanbul and conducted informal interviews with 12 respondents, six of whom had immigrated from China in the 1990s and 2000s; the other six respondents immigrated from China within the last few years.

1. ‘Uyghurness’ from the ethno-symbolist perspective

Anthony D. Smith’s (2009) ethno-symbolist approach to the study of nations and nationalism is a sort of synthesis of instrumentalist-modernist and primordial-perennialist theories. Yet, Smith, unlike modernist, instrumentalist or post-modernist scholars, deals with ‘the nature of ethnic groups and nations’ (1). Smith notes that unlike modernists, scholars of ethno-symbolism emphasize ‘the role of subjective and symbolic resources in motivating ideologies and collective actions’ (16). Thus, ethno-symbolists try to ‘to enter the “inner world” of the participants and understand their perceptions and visions’ (16). The ‘inner world’, in turn, allows for an understanding of the zealous dedication which a nation evokes. Frequently, solely political or economic perspectives on nationalism fail to explain its ‘symbolic dimensions’ (1). Ethno-symbolism is special in this sense as it studies the ways in which ‘cultural and symbolic elements of myth, value, memory, and symbol provide frameworks for understanding and aspiration (...) embodied in a sense of common ethnic identity and of belonging to a cultural community of imputed common ancestry’ (18). Consideration of the symbols, myths and memories is important for the study of Uyghur nationalism because they play a significant role in framing Uyghur culture and defining the relations within the Uyghur community.

Ethno-symbolism also explains the process of internal and external contestation, negotiation and change of myths, values, symbols and traditions. It also explains why nations are persistent and long-lived. Smith argues that language, culture, traditions, food, religion and other

elements constitute ‘a distinctive symbolic repertoire’ that distinguishes one community from others ‘in the eyes of both its members and outsiders’, and that this distinctive symbolic repertoire creates a line dividing ‘us from them’ (25) and enhances a sentiment of succession with past generations. These symbols, sentiments and beliefs help to establish and maintain communal ties and a sense of national identity.

In highlighting the role of symbols and myths in the creation and durability of nations, ethno-symbolists do not neglect the influence of socioeconomic and political factors. They recognize that politics and elites have a significant role in the shaping of ethnic bonds and the sense of national identity. Yet, ethno-symbolism takes it a step further by focusing on how specific projects presented by the elites, and the community reaction to them, shape nations. Unlike instrumentalists, Smith argues that nation-building is a two-way process based on ‘selection and resonance’ (31), arguing that elites’ projects must include carefully selected range of symbols, traditions, memories, myths (31) which have preceding resonance over a majority of the population, because usually, the ‘population is sub-divided into strata and regions, (...) dialect (...) and religious categories and communities (31)’. According to Avtar Brah ‘if there is an end product of identity formation at all (...) it cannot be one homogeneous model of identity that equally serves for all members of a group. We must be as ready to ask for different and shifting levels of identity, as for conflicting and contesting designs’ (quoted in Kokot, Tololyan & Alfonso, 2004: 7).

Identity formation in diaspora communities is particularly complicated. ‘Members of diaspora communities are confronted with a multitude of “others”, towards whom quite different designs of identity may be presented’(7). These can be places of residence with their written and unwritten laws and regulations; members of the same diaspora communities in various countries; and, requirements of their perceived real homeland (7).Brah suggests that the notion of diaspora focuses on ‘*the configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another*’(1996: 183). Diasporas are frequently created by multiple journeys to various places, each one having its own history and specifics. These journeys can ‘configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and relived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory’ (183).Thus, diasporic identity is not static, but a dynamic phenomenon that is shaped and reshaped by the ‘everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively’ (183).

Another reason for applying the ethno-symbolist approach is its focus on the social and symbolic influence of conflicts both between and within communities and nations. These comprise the cultural and psychological impacts of long-lasting rivalries and inner tensions that occur as a result of various interpretation of the community's myth–symbol complex. Wars and rivalries between ethnic groups, as they are a painful common legacy that is significant in the formation of common memories, beliefs and myths. They, in turn, contribute to the rise of nationalism in the longrun. As this research focuses on identity development, and its internal and external contestation, these principles of ethno-symbolism can be appropriately applied to the case study of Uyghur people both in Turkey and in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

Below are some of the major principles of the ethno-symbolist approach that need to be kept in mind while studying the development of Uyghur identity. Nations and nationalism are not fixed. They are active and resonating. They are influenced by political and social shifts. Every generation defines the myth–symbol complex in its own way. Sometimes, some segments of the population may give up some elements of the myth–symbol complex and choose other cultural or religious traditions. This renews and modifies ethnic bonds and sentiments under pressures of changing environments. This is particularly applicable to this study as it examines the dynamics, internal conflicts and religious factors influencing identity development.

The ethno-symbolist approach is frequently criticized for failing to explain interethnic and other conflicts. However, ethno-symbolism can be (and is being) applied to studies of conflicts, including those of an interethnic nature. Smith also recognized the ‘reciprocal effects of war and ethnicity’ (2009: 115) and the importance of relations with ‘others’ for the formation of a nation. He highlighted the significant role that “‘others’ play in defining “the ethnic self” and demarcate[ing] the boundary between “them” and “us”, as part of a processual approach to ethnogenesis and nation formation’ (116).

Moreover, ethno-symbolism focuses on internal conflicts and reciprocal relationships between elites and the rest of the population, relationships between different sections within the population, and inner alteration. Regarding the latter, Smith also writes that inner transformation frequently occurs during times of ‘perceived decline from a mythical “golden age” of national purity and authenticity, through the conflict between alternative visions of national destiny carried by rival elites and their non-elite constituencies who invoke different, and sometimes opposed, sets of symbolic resources’ (116). He further argues that the internal conflict is restrained through

extreme reinterpretations of the myth–symbol complex that meet the interests of the new segments of the community. Alternatively, ‘new interpretative syntheses’ (Smith, 2009: 116) may emerge, which select some elements of the received myth–symbol complex and accommodate them within the agenda of new segments of society.

Ethno-symbolism is therefore the chosen critical theory for this research, as it examines the relationship between nationalism and religion, social processes that shape a nation, its transformation, its durability, and its internal and external contestation.

2. Identity development of Uyghurs in Turkey

According to Michael Dillon (2004), Uyghurs in Xinjiang highlight the distinctiveness of their identity, particularly its difference from the Han Chinese. This view is supported by Gardner Bovingdon (2010) who wrote that ‘various forms of everyday resistance have (...) strengthened Uyghurs’ collective identity and resolve to remain distinct from the “Chinese nation”’ (86). Joanne Finley also stresses Uyghurs’ resistance to Chinese culture. She argues that if, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uyghurs expressed their distinctiveness mainly through songs and use of Uyghur language, after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the emergence of harsher policies in China, the ‘symbolic resistance has taken a new form of religious renewal: the current return to prayer’(quoted in Tapp, 2015). Fanny Olson (2015) also argues that Uyghurs increasingly emphasize the religious ‘features of their identity, such as their Halal diet and celebration of Ramadan’ (2015: 46), highlighting the boundary between them and the Han Chinese.

This was confirmed during the interviews and meetings with Uyghur people in Turkey. In fact, the most frequent narratives involved a mix of religious and national–liberationism. Respondents who had left China in the 1990s and 2000s unanimously claimed that, while Islam had been present in XUAR, increasing religiosity among Uyghurs is a recent phenomenon that has emerged as a response to Chinese policies of religious repression in Xinjiang.

In fact, for some younger members of the Turkish Uyghur diaspora, religious identity seems to be replacing ethnicity as the primary aspect of their identity; this is in spite of a very strong ethnic identity and affiliation with East Turkestan. In the following quotes, all interviewees’ names have been replaced by numbers to protect their anonymity and maintain the integrity of the review process.

Interviewee 31 (F, 25-34) said: ‘First of all, I am Muslim. Ummati Muhammad [i.e. Islam] is more important to me. It is greater than any separate nation’ (July 13, 2018). Three other young female respondents shared her views.‘Being Muslim is more important for me...Unlike our brothers and sisters in East Turkestan, I live freely in Turkey. I am not brainwashed’ (15 July, 2018). Yet, all four women expressed their love for the Uyghur nation, and hope that God will liberate the Uyghur people. Interviewee 32 (F, 25-34) said: ‘I am proud to be Uyghur (...) There can be no Turkic history without Uyghur history. What we are going through is God’s test. We need to be patient’ (15 July, 2018).

When asked whether they think that believe in the independence of East Turkestanis possible in future, the majority of respondents (11 of 12) said that it is quite possible. Interviewee 34 (F, 25-34):

Who thought that the Soviet Union would collapse? I hope that we will get our independence like you [Former Soviet Republics], peacefully. After the things that Chinese did to us, we cannot stay with them. But if there needs to be a struggle for independence,if we need to die, then, let it be so. We will die. There can be no feast without sacrifice (15 July, 2018).

Interestingly, anti-Chinese sentiment also emerged in discussions of intermarriage. Interviewee 35 (F, 18-25) said:

Uyghur men can marry [outside the community] because their children will be Uyghur. However, if women marry non-Uyghurs, our nation will not grow. But, in special circumstances, women can also marry non-Uyghurs, preferably Turkic people but only if they are Muslim. But if it is a Chinese Muslim, then it should not be allowed. No, no Chinese. (16 July, 2018).

Generally, the majority of Uyghurs in Turkey express a negative view of China. Several interviewees expressed hatred for China, citing incidents of confiscated property and disappeared relatives. ‘Answers like this were quite common, since every respondent had personal experience of a relative being killed or disappeared.

Most of the respondents were very religious and saw the independence of East Turkestan from China not only as a national liberation but also as a religious liberation from what they call ‘Han occupation’. China’s repressive policies, human rights violations and concentration camps (officially ‘re-education camps’) for detaining and indoctrinating Muslim minorities have

divided families, destroyed lives and left the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey with painful memories. This has made the freedom of East Turkestan a central issue in Uyghur identity.

3. Protection of ‘Uyghurness’

The results of interviews showed that Uyghur people in Turkey have an incredibly strong affiliation with ‘Uyghurness’, with Islam being an inherent part of being Uyghur. ‘Uyghurness’ is also defined in contradistinction to Han Chinese. All respondents, regardless of age and sex, expressed concerns about Chinese repression of the Uyghur nation and stated that it is necessary to preserve and pass down the Uyghur language, traditions, customs, values and religion. Interviewee 36 said: ‘I cook Uyghur meals and I try to decorate my home with Uyghur things: flags, our traditional patterns. By doing these small things, I feel like I make a contribution to the preservation of our nation’ (16 July, 2018).

This accords with Smith’s (2009) ethno-symbolist understanding of the link between symbols and identity. This is distinctively symbolic and highlights a feeling of connection with past generations. These symbols, sentiments and beliefs help to establish and maintain communal ties and a sense of national identity. Exactly as (Smith, 2009: 25) argued, Uyghur language, traditions and religion constitute ‘a distinctive symbolic repertoire’ that divides Uyghurs from Han Chinese in the eyes of both Uyghurs and Hans.

The ethno-symbolist perspective also explains why Uyghurs have not assimilated, but rather strengthened their ethnic identity, proposing that ‘defenders of the group’ are inclined to maintain and transfer their beliefs, myths, memories, symbols and values to their descendants. In Turkey, members of Uyghur diaspora have saved and passed on the Uyghur ‘myth–symbol complex’ to their children.

Smith’s focus on the social and symbolic influence of conflicts between communities and nations is also very relevant for the Uyghur case. The long-lasting rivalry between Uyghurs and Han Chinese has become a painful common cultural and psychological legacy, contributing to the strengthening of ethnic Uyghur identity and the rise of Uyghur nationalism.

4. Identity development among Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan

This section will first present the results of the survey and interviews within the following topics: ‘Motherland’, ‘Language, music and customs’, ‘Role of religion’, ‘Uyghur culture vs Islamic law’ and ‘Attitudes towards East Turkestan’.

4.1 Motherland

In order to identify state affiliation, the sample population were asked the open-ended question: Where is your motherland? They were not given any names of geographic areas so as not to influence results of the survey. In the 16–24 age group, 95% wrote that their homeland is Kyrgyzstan. Respondents in the age group 25–34 were less unanimous, but 61% still wrote that Kyrgyzstan is their motherland, with 39% writing Uyghurstan or East Turkestan. This division is almost identical in the 35–49 group, with 61.5% writing Kyrgyzstan and 38.5% writing Uyghurstan or East Turkestan. But in the 50–64 age group, only 42% wrote Kyrgyzstan, with the other 58% writing Uyghurstan, East Turkestan or a specific city in China (such as Gulja). An absolute majority in the 65 and over group (96%) wrote Uyghurstan or East Turkestan, while only 4% wrote Kyrgyzstan. Figure 1 clearly shows the relationship between the respondents’ age and their homeland affiliation, with those who immigrated to Kyrgyzstan in the 1950s and 1960s having more affiliation with Uyghurstan or East Turkestan than their descendants do.

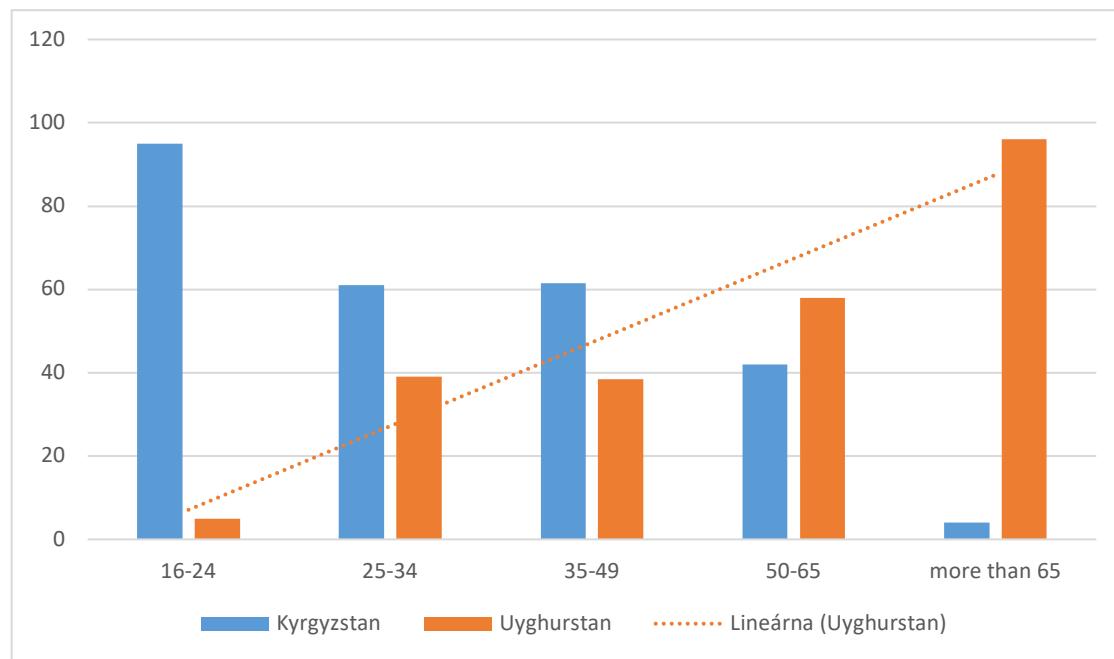


Figure 1: State affiliation

4.2 Uyghur language, music and customs

Since language is one of the markers that distinguish ‘us from them’, the next question attempted to evaluate knowledge of the Uyghur language among the Uyghur population in Kyrgyzstan. Of the respondents, 3% said that they do not speak or understand Uyghur at all, 12% said they can understand but not speak Uyghur, 34% said they can speak basic Uyghur, 37% said that they speak good Uyghur and 14% speak Uyghur fluently. Figure 2 shows Uyghur language ability by age. Young Uyghurs’ ability to speak the Uyghur language is lower than that of older generations. None of the respondents below the age of 34 is able to speak Uyghur fluently. Most of the respondents in this age group them speak basic Uyghur, and a significant number of respondents in the 16–24 age group only have a passive knowledge of Uyghur. The regression line in Figure 2 shows the decline in the fluent knowledge of the Uyghur language.

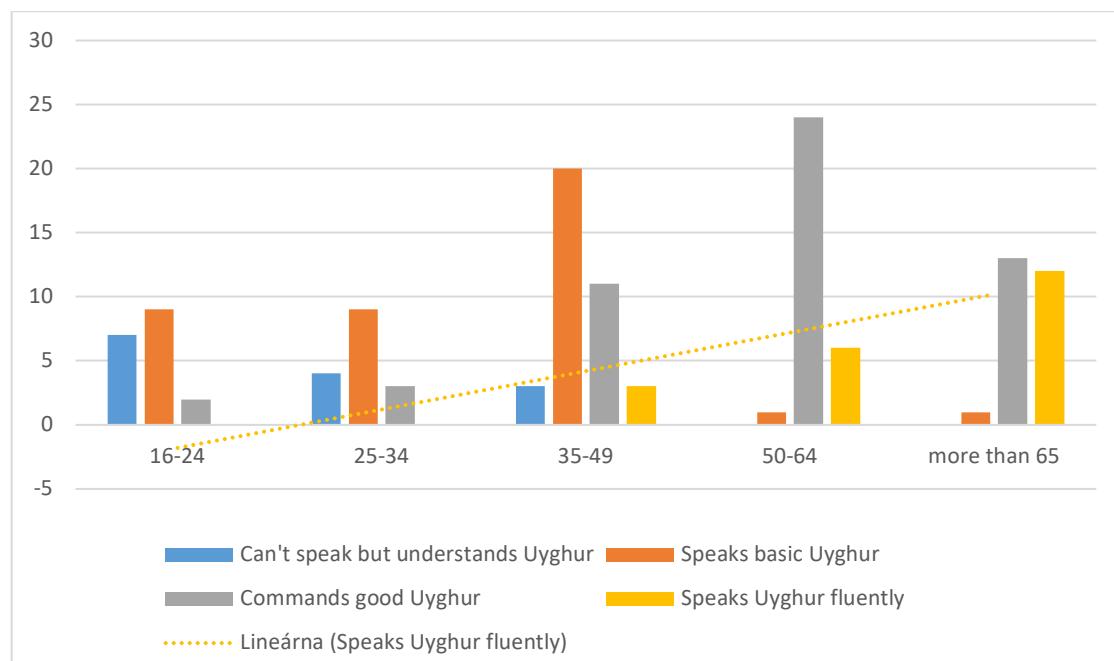


Figure 2: Language proficiency

4.3 Role of Religion in Uyghur communities of Kyrgyzstan

The next question looked at the place of religion in the lives of Uyghur people in Kyrgyzstan. Only 4% of respondents identified themselves as non-religious, 40% said they are moderately religious,

45% identified as religious and 11% identified as very religious. Figure 3 shows the levels of religiosity for each age group.

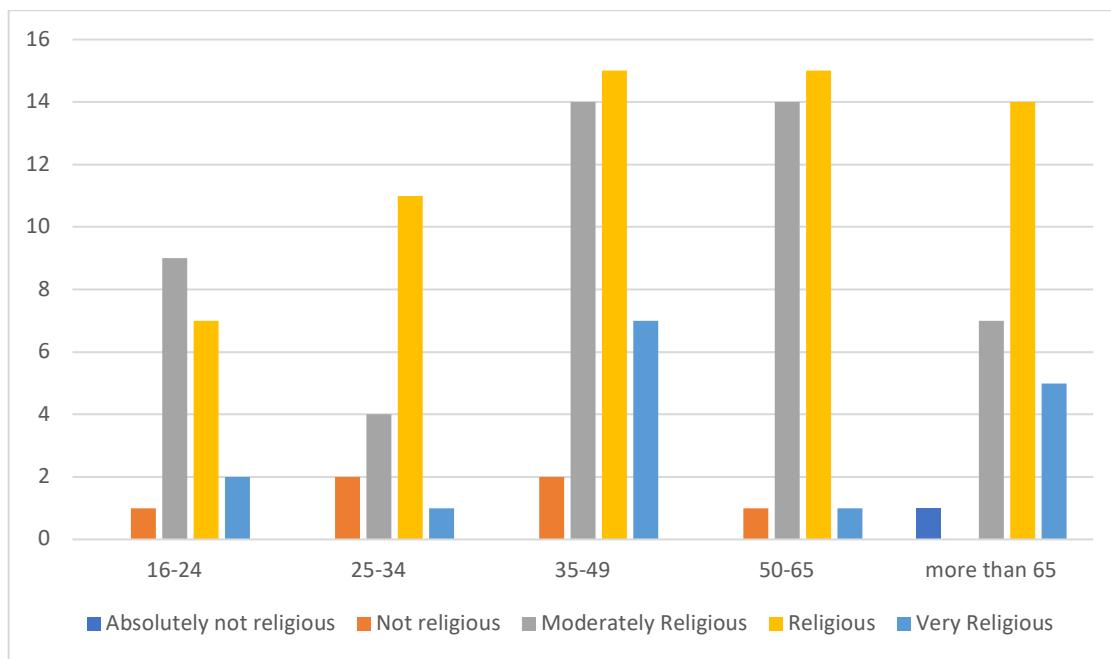


Figure 3: Religiosity

Talking about when and why they became religious, subjects gave a variety of answers.

Interviewee 1 (F, 35-45) said:

I am a doctor and I studied in the Soviet Union. We were taught that God does not exist. But when my grandfather, who was a good man, died, I had a dream that he was in paradise and beautiful blue birds were surrounding him. And then when I got married, with my husband's influence I started praying and practising religion (3 August, 2018).

Interviewee 2 (F, 25-34) said: 'I was not that religious before but when I got married I could not get pregnant for many years. I started praying. After that, I adopted a child and immediately got pregnant' (10 August, 2018).

Interviewee 16 (M, 65-75) said:

I always believed in God despite Soviet indoctrination, but I was not a practising Muslim. At that time, it was common for us [Uyghurs] to drink alcohol, smoke, and not to pray. I used to sell pork when I was young. Many of us did. But after the Soviet Union collapsed,

in 1996, I went on the Hajj and then my life changed. I stopped drinking alcohol and smoking. I started praying and learning about Islam (18 March, 2018).

Many respondents who had lived in the Soviet Union gave similar answers. Some who were born and raised during the Soviet period said they did not identify as atheists, even though they did not have a very religious way of life, because their parents taught them some basics of Islam. Interviewee 3 (F, 50-64) said:

During Soviet times we were taught that God does not exist. We had to say this to become ‘pioneers’ [scouts]. We went to a disco, we used to wear short skirts but at home, our parents told us that our religion is Islam and we continued to identify as Muslims. Only 8–10 years ago I started praying but it happened because of my children who had become religious and had asked me to start praying (1 August, 2018).

Interviewee 4 (F, 50-64) also talked about the non-religious Soviet legacy and said that she had started praying because of her children. ‘My daughters became religious, and their behaviour changed, they became better. When I looked at them I also started practising religion’ (1 August, 2018). It was quite a frequent phenomenon among respondents to mention the influence of their children on their religiosity.

Respondents in younger age groups (16–24, 25–34) were more likely to have been religious since childhood or their teenage years. Interviewee 17 (M, 16-24) said: ‘I have been religious since childhood. I am from a religious family’(8 August, 2018).

Many female respondents of the 35–49 age group said that they became religious after marriage, due to their husbands’ influence, or with childbirth. Interviewee 5 said: ‘I started praying when I became a mother’(15 August, 2018). Interviewee 6 said: ‘We were a traditional Uyghur family before. Not too religious. But when my husband became more religious, he taught me and I started practising, too. Besides, more people in my surroundings became religious. It also had an impact on me’(24 August, 2018).

Religious surroundings were one of the most frequently given reasons, among both men and women. Interviewee 7 (F, 50-64) joked: ‘I go where the crowd goes’(1 August, 2018). Interviewee 18 (M, 25-34) also said: ‘Communication with religious people made me think about my way of life. I understood that Islam is a true religion and that my actions are wrong. This is how I started practising religion’ (5 August, 2018).

Male respondents were less willing than female respondents to talk about their religious journeys. Many of them just talked about sins they had committed and that they had found the truth, or that ‘it happened by God’s will’ (4 August, 2018). Interviewee 26 (M, 25-34) said: ‘I became religious approximately ten years ago. At that time only a few people from our *Mashrap*[traditional male associations] prayed. Now more than half of our *Mashrap* pray’ (2 August, 2018).

Interviewee 29 (M, 35-49) said:

We were born and raised during Soviet times and it strongly affected us. We were far from being religious. But the Soviet Union and communism collapsed. Islam started spreading in Central Asia. Our brothers had an opportunity to study religion in Saudi Arabia and other Arabic countries. They came back and started teaching us the basics of religion. Gradually we became more religious. Before that, we had known that we were Muslims. But we had had superficial knowledge. Thank God, he has given us an understanding of this religion. And it has become our way of life (3 August, 2018).

When asked where they got their religious knowledge, most respondents identified multiple sources. Out of the 135 respondents, 35%named the internet as a source, 33%mentioned books, 33% mentioned relatives, family, friends and other acquaintances, and 22%mentioned an imam or other spiritual leader. In fact, interviews revealed that many respondents who identify as Salafis listen to the same preachers giving lectures on YouTube. Male Interviewee 30 (M, 35-49) said: ‘Now it is easy. We have the internet. We can watch live videos with religious scholars. If someone speaks Arabic, we can ask questions. Also, many scholars now have YouTube channels’ (3 August, 2018).

4.4 Uyghur culture vs Islamic law (Sharia)

In order to unveil internal contestation within Uyghur communities, respondents were also asked their views on Uyghur music, traditions and Sharia. Some Muslims believe that music, and several other Uyghur customs, are not allowed in Islam and very religious Uyghurs tend to give up these aspects of their culture. This gives rise to tensions within the community in Kyrgyzstan regarding ‘Uyghurness’, and the loss of Uyghur culture and identity. Questions on music and traditions therefore provide a prism through which to study this internal contestation.

When asked: ‘Do you listen to Uyghur music?’ the majority (87%) of respondents said ‘yes’. The other 12%answered ‘no’, saying that music is not allowed in Islam. Interestingly, a few

respondents suspect a Chinese conspiracy in this issue. Interviewee 8 (F, 35-49) said ‘The Chinese cannot force us to abandon our ethnicity and culture as they do in East Turkestan, because we live in Kyrgyzstan. That is why they promote the special kind of Islam here to make us lose our culture and forget who we are. The Chinese government wants to eliminate our culture’(24 August, 2018).. Interviewee 18 (M, 50-64)said: ‘They promote a special kind of Islam (...) that prohibits our music, dances, traditions. They do this to destroy our nation’(21 August, 2018). ‘Figure 4 shows responses to this question by age group.

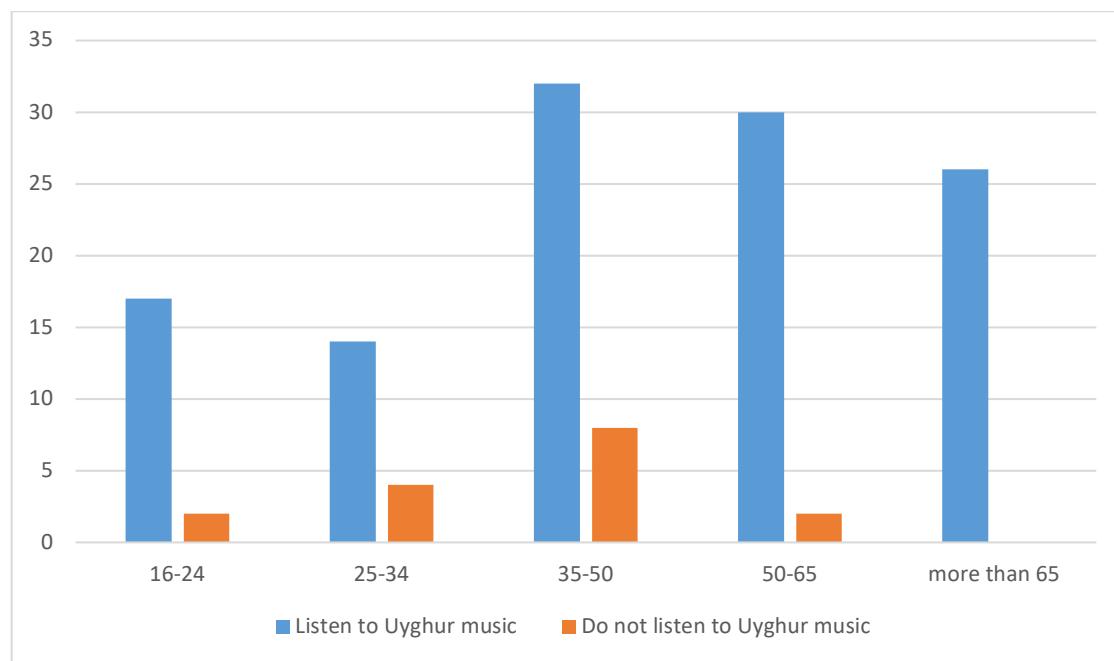


Figure 4: Opinions on listening to Uyghur music

The next question asked: ‘Do you implement Uyghur customs in your daily lives?’ to which 90% answered ‘yes’, 2% said ‘no’, and another 8% answered ‘only those that do not contradict Islam’.

There was a similar response to the question: ‘Should Uyghur traditions and values be transferred to the following generations?’, with 96% answering ‘yes’ and 4% answering ‘only those that do not contradict Islam’. They were then asked: ‘What should be prioritized if there is a contradiction between Uyghur culture and Islamic teachings?’ to which 35% responded ‘Islam’, 32% responded ‘Uyghur traditions’ and the other 33% said it depends on the situation.

Asked whether religion or ethnicity was more important for them, 68% of respondents said ‘religion’, 21% said ‘ethnicity’, 5% said ‘both’ and 6% said ‘other’. Answering the question ‘How does the rising religiosity of Uyghurs influence the future of the Uyghur nation?’ 4% said ‘very negatively’, 19% said ‘negatively’, 30% said ‘I don’t know’, 36% said ‘positively’ and 11% said ‘very positively’.

Generally, the results of the survey supported the first hypothesis of this thesis: that ethnic identity among Kyrgyz Uyghurs is strong. Yet, for some, Muslim identity is taking on primacy in their construction of identity. On the other hand, the results contradict the second hypothesis that there is an association between one’s age and attitude towards religion and ethnic nationalism.

The interviews supported the findings of the survey, revealing three main groups: First, there are very religious Uyghurs who give up all the ‘wrong traditions’ for the sake of God. Second, there are people who practice religion but also practice all the traditions that are considered to be ‘wrong’ by the first group. People in this group usually do not see any contradiction between Islam and ‘Uyghurness’. The third group views ‘excessive’ religiosity as a threat to Uyghur culture and identity. It is important to note that, despite these disagreements, the majority of respondents (including the very religious) emphasized their adherence to ethnic Uyghur identity.

Interviewee 19 (M, 25-34) said:

I was brought up in a religious family that highly values Uyghur traditions. But at that time our practice of Islam was different. We were told that this is wrong or this is right without any evidence. At that time we were implementing our culture. But now we require evidence from the Quran and ‘Sunnah’ [traditional Islamic practices] when it comes to rights and wrongs. Now we do not do many cultural things that we used to do. I do not listen to Uyghur music for example. But still, I believe that we must keep those traditions that do not contradict Islam and pass them on to our offspring. We need to keep our identity, patriotism, and God Willing we will have our motherland free (15 August, 2018).

Interviewee 20 (M, 35-49) said: ‘We are Uyghurs, this is important for us. Yet, first of all, I am a Muslim. That is why I believe we need to practice only those traditions that do not contradict Islam. All others should be given up’ (22 August, 2018). This view was supported by another Interviewee 21 (M, 35-49), who said:

I am really sorry to see that our language is disappearing. The young generation does not speak Uyghur, but if Allah [God] prohibits something we must obey. The problems

Uyghurs have today are not because of religion but because of its absence or wrong interpretation. We need to keep those traditions that are allowed and discipline ourselves. Then everything will be good for Uyghurs (24 August, 2018).

Interviewee 25 (M, 25-34), a 33-year-old male, had similar views:

Sometimes traditions of Central Asian regions are considered to be more important than Islam. Some customs contradict Islam. I personally think that customs which are in line with Islam need to be maintained and developed. But those that contradict must not be practised (2 August, 2018).

Interviewee 8 (F, 50-64) also noticed that she practices only those traditions that are allowed in Islam:

They blame us for everything, they call us [women who wear hijab] ‘ChupaChups’ [brand of lollipop]. My husband reads the news article about Salafis. As usual, they were saying that we were bad. He is not religious at all and he asked me whether I was a Salafi or not. I said no. I lied because it is easier to lie than to convince him that what they say is not true.

She added that she does not attend weddings when she knows that they will play music.

Music is haram [forbidden], it means we should not listen to it. Alhamdulillah ['with the grace of God'], people gradually understand it. Today, many Uyghurs do not implement the pagan traditions which we used to have before (11 August, 2018).

Interviewee 28 (M 25-34) said: ‘I started growing a beard and all my uncles immediately told me to shave it. They think that a beard is a sign of radicalization, Wahhabism. I told that I didn’t impose my views on them and asked them to do the same with me’ (29 July, 2018).

Yet, another Interviewee 9, (F, 65-75), said: ‘I am a religious person, I read the Quran in Arabic but I also listen to Uyghur music and I love everything in our culture and traditions. Islam and Uyghur culture are interrelated, they don’t contradict each other’(12 August, 2018). Interviewee 15 (F, 65-75), had somewhat similar views: ‘I think that I am moderately religious. I pray five times, fast, give charity and follow all the customs that I learned from my father and mother. I do not wear a headscarf, I dye my hair, I wear short dresses. I listen to music. I dance. But I try not to offend people’(4 August. 2018). Interviewee 10 (F, 25-34) responded:

I am religious. I pray, fast, and try to practice religion. I heard some say that music is not allowed in Islam and that some of our customs are not allowed either. But I still practice them because if Uyghurs do not keep our culture then we will disappear as a nation. If we had our own state that would guarantee the survival of the Uyghur nation then we could leave them. But not in these conditions (3 August, 2018).

Her view was also supported by Interviewee 22 (M,65-64)

Uyghurs are not free. We are occupied by the enemies who do their best to assimilate Uyghurs and to eliminate us from the surface of the Earth. If we, here, in democratic Kyrgyzstan do not keep our language, religion and traditions then we will just disappear as a nation (12 April, 2018).

Interviewee 23 (M, 16-24) said:

I was born in a Muslim family but I became more religious when my friends started practising religion. I think that the overall increasing religiosity of Uyghurs is good for our society. We do not drink alcohol, smoke, use drugs or gamble. We do not harm other people, show more respect for our parents and relatives. Yet, certainly, the more people adhere to religion the less their adherence to the nation becomes. This may harm the Uyghur nation in the future (7 August, 2018).

Interviewee 11, an 18-year-old female, also agreed that the increasing role of religion is potentially threatening for Uyghur culture:

I am moderately religious. Some prohibitions irritate me. I think first of all one needs to have a good heart. Today, many Uyghurs say that music is haram [prohibited] but music and dances are the core of Uyghur culture. I think while it is good for an individual to be religious it may have a bad impact on the nation as a whole (9 August, 2018).

The respondents cited below have a more critical view of increasing religiosity. Interviewee 24 (M, 50-64) said:

I am Muslim, but I am not religious. I think we should live as our ancestors did. What is happening to our culture and language? These religious people destroy it. Why do they need to say inshAllah[God willing] in Arabic when they can say it in Uyghur Hudayimbuyrisa? (11 August. 2018).

Some female respondents were also against the ‘Arabization’ of Uyghur people. Interviewee 12 (F, 50-64) said: ‘I am a moderate Muslim. When I look at some religious Uyghurs I remember the phrase “force a fool to worship God”. Because of their actions, our ethnus can

disappear. We should not allow this. We must fight to keep our nation and culture' (1 August, 2018). Female Interviewee 13 (F, 50-64) was also critical of increasing religiosity among the Uyghur diaspora of Kyrgyzstan:

I practice religion as my parents taught me to. I do not listen to what these *boradachi* [men who have beards] say. They can only speak about religion but they have no manners. Before, during Soviet times, people were kind, decent, they were mannerly. Now, the *boradachi* do not get up when older people enter the room, and these girls wearing hijab do not want to bow to older people during the wedding (16 May, 2018).

Dissatisfaction with *boradachi* and women wearing hijab was quite frequently mentioned during the interviews. Interestingly, some respondents were dissatisfied with their own children's strict adherence to religion. Interviewee 24(M, 50-64) said: 'My son has a big beard and wears shortened trousers [what many believe to be a Salafi style]. I tried to convince him to cut his beard but I gave up' (11 August, 2018). Interviewee 14 (F, 50-64) also said: 'I told my daughter not to wear hijab but she did. I told my son to cut his beard but he did not. Why do they need to imitate Arabs when we have our own beautiful culture?'(23 May, 2018).

Interviewee 27(M, 25-34) observed tensions between younger and older generations:

I see a tendency that when Islam started actively spreading across regions in Kyrgyzstan when young people started practising [religion], society started to separate. Youth wants knowledge, but elderly people stick to traditional Islam that was transmitted from generation to generation. When young people start acting differently from the elderly, society splits. Six or seven years ago, the split was very strong. People had an extremely negative attitude towards each other. But now young people understand that they should not act like this. We must show a good example that we are not aggressive radicals. Now this gap is becoming less (2 August, 2018).

4.5 Attitudes towards East Turkestan

In order to study Uyghurs' attitudes towards the situation in XUAR, and the prospect of an independent East Turkestan or Uyghurstan, respondents were asked two questions: 'Do you receive any information about the situation in XUAR (if yes, then how)?' and 'What is your attitude towards its independence? 'It is important to note that respondents could choose multiple answers. Only 10% said 'I do not receive any information about Xinjiang Uyghurs'. All others received some information about the situation in XUAR. A total of 50% of respondents mentioned

the internet as a source of information, 10% said ‘news’, 28% mentioned ‘friends, relatives and other acquaintances’ and 21% said ‘from Uyghur community leaders’.

Regarding the independence of East Turkestan, only 0.8% said they do not support the idea, 7.4% said they do not care, 49.6% say they are ‘positive’ about the independence of East Turkestan and 42.2% answered that they are ‘very positive’. Thus, the majority of respondents in Kyrgyzstan support the idea of independent East Turkestan. This was also confirmed during the interviews. Almost every interviewee said they would support the independence of East Turkestan—the answers varied only in peoples’ thoughts on the price to be paid.

Unlike the case of Uyghurs in Turkey, where the answers and attitudes were quite similar, Uyghur people in Kyrgyzstan expressed a variety of views, some in sharp contrast with each other. There were three main positions: First, ‘Uyghurness’ is more important than anything else. Traditions and language should be preserved and transferred to future generations. The increasing religiosity of Uyghurs has a disastrous effect on the Uyghur nation. Second, ethnicity is important, but religion is more important. If some traditions contradict religion, then they must be given up. Third, there is no contradiction between religion and ethnicity—Islam is intrinsic to ‘Uyghurness’. Nevertheless, all three groups agreed on the importance of transmitting the Uyghur language and traditions to their offspring – although there was some variance on exactly which elements of the culture should be transmitted, and which should be given up.

The Uyghur case is an obvious example of how values and traditions are promoted by some members of the ethnic group and rejected by others, leading to contestation, negotiation and the gradual replacement of some traditions by others. As Smith wrote various groups within a nation may have different “myth-symbol complex,” which at times leads to clash between opposing ideas promoted by these groups. This internal contestation, in its turn, transforms a community according to the needs of the emerging groups (2009).

Ethno-symbolism also proposes that elites are influential in identity formation. This is borne out in this study, as 21% of the sample receive information about Uyghurs from local leaders. In fact, by increasing the diaspora’s awareness of the situation in XUAR, local leaders reinforce the connection of Kyrgyz Uyghurs to the Uyghurs of China, contributing to the shaping of transboundary ethnic bonds and sense of national identity.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Uyghur people in Turkey have a strong affiliation with their ethnic and religious identity, which has been reinforced by the repressive policies of the CCP towards national minorities in China. The great majority of Turkish Uyghurs belong to the first generation of migrants; they fled China and have lost contact with their families. These painful memories have only strengthened the image of China as an enemy of Uyghurs and of Islam. At the same time, the Turkish public's support of the Uyghur community has strengthened Uyghurs' association with their Turkic origins.

The majority of respondents in Kyrgyzstan express concerns about the situation in XUAR, but the Chinese issue is not central for them. Unlike in Turkey, most of the respondents belong to the second, third or even fourth generation of immigrants. Thus, even though they can understand the pain of Uyghur people around the world, they have not experienced it first-hand.

The Kyrgyz government has never made attempts to assimilate Uyghurs into Kyrgyz culture. Uyghurs have always enjoyed the freedom to maintain and practice their culture, language and religion, which has led to the transformation of the myth–symbol complex in the Uyghur diaspora. Ethnic identity among Kyrgyz Uyghurs is still strong, but Islam has shifted from being understood as a mere marker of ethnic identity to a serious religious commitment. For some Uyghurs, religion has replaced ethnicity as the primary marker of identity, leading to contestation within Kyrgyzstan's Uyghur community.

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