

# Pathways to Statelessness and Parent-Child Separation among Uyghurs in Turkey<sup>1</sup>

Marie-Ève Melanson, *McGill University*

**Abstract:** This article explores the self-reported experiences of Uyghur migrants in Turkey regarding the pathways that lead to statelessness and parent-child separation. First, I discuss statelessness among Uyghurs, including Uyghur children, living in Turkey. Second, I address the issue of parent-child separation during migration and resettlement, and the resulting “orphanhood” of Uyghur children. Finally, I turn to the role that Uyghur-led educational initiatives play in addressing Uyghur refugee children’s needs specifically, and the current crisis in the Uyghur homeland more generally. This paper contributes to the scholarship on refugee law and resettlement by exploring the ways in which the crisis in the Uyghur homeland has impacted and continues to impact Uyghurs’ refugee narratives and priorities as they reorganize their lives in the diaspora.

**Keywords:** Uyghur refugees, statelessness, identity transmission, Turkey, China

This article explores the self-reported experiences of Uyghur migrants in Turkey regarding the pathways that lead to statelessness and parent-child separation. Within the scholarship on refugee law, the administrative system that hears refugee claims has been reported to be “deterministic and disempowering.”<sup>2</sup> In the process of seeking asylum, migrants are often required to recount their story in a way that can feel reductive or negating of their own experiences. For instance, in research conducted on refugee claims in Canada, Cécile Rousseau and Patricia Foxen have observed that a majority of refugee applicants, including “several whose final decision was positive,”<sup>3</sup> felt that they were not properly heard by

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1. This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), under Susan J. Palmer’s Insight Grant 435-2017-1102. This article could not have been written without the assistance and contribution of a number of people. First and foremost, I am deeply thankful to all of those who shared their stories for the purpose of this research and provided invaluable, first-hand information on the situation of Uyghur refugees in Turkey. A special acknowledgement goes to Mehmet Tohti and Kayum Masimov at the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project. In addition to providing a significant amount of the on-the-ground information and data on which this article rests, Tohti and Masimov helped to establish connections with Uyghur organizations in Turkey and provided their insights on the topics addressed in this article at various stages of its conception. This research was conducted as part of Susan J. Palmer’s project *Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control*. I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of Susan J. Palmer in the writing of this article, as well as the contribution of my fellow research assistants, Dilmurat Mahmut and Abdulmuqtedir Udun, whose feedback on an initial version of this paper and assistance setting up and translating virtual interviews throughout the course of this research project has been indispensable.

2. Matthew Zagor, “Recognition and Narrative Identities: Is Refugee Law Redeemable?” in *Allegiance and Identity in a Globalised World*, ed. Fiona Jenkins, Mark Nolan, and Kim Rubenstein (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 313. See also Anthea Vogl, “Telling Stories from Start to Finish: Exploring the Demand for Narrative in Refugee Testimony,” *Griffith Law Review* 22, no. 1 (2013): 63–86; Cécile Rousseau and Patricia Foxen, “‘Look Me in the Eye’: Empathy and the Transmission of Trauma in the Refugee Determination Process,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 47, no. 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461510362338>.

3. Rousseau and Foxen, “Look Me in the Eye,” 84.

those handling their case. Some expressed having felt helpless when they were asked to answer complex questions regarding their own story with a simple “yes” or “no.”<sup>4</sup>

While the procedures surrounding refugee claims are intended to gather relevant information on the migrant, scholars have observed that they often operate with preconceived notions of what a so-called “refugee narrative” should look like. As Anthea Zogl puts it, when formulated in the official context of a refugee application, “[r]efugee stories must have narrative qualities, and certain substantive narratives and narrative forms tend to be demanded over others.” Continuing, she notes that “[t]he problem with these demands for narrativity is that neither a refugee applicant’s experiences (life as lived), nor the person’s subsequent accounts of them (life as told), can necessarily meet these expectations.”<sup>5</sup>

As these studies reveal, the official or legal processes through which migrants seek refuge do not necessarily correspond to or consider all the migrant’s concerns or experiences. In this paper, I seek to offer an emic perspective on the lived reality of Uyghur migrants trying to obtain new citizenship. As such, this paper deals primarily with the self-reported experiences of Uyghur migrants and is not trying to assert a legal claim. By drawing on Uyghurs’ resettlement stories and the literature on statelessness, my goal is to shed light on the multi-faceted reality of Uyghur refugees living in Turkey. What emerges from this portrait is a view of how both China’s and Turkey’s policies place Uyghurs at a disadvantage for securing new citizenship. However, Uyghur refugee narratives also reveal a desire for retaliation against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as a feeling of responsibility towards countering of the CCP’s attempts to erase the Uyghur culture. These two latter components, while beyond the scope of what is asked in a refugee application, are pivotal in the reorganization of many Uyghurs’ lives in the diaspora. In Turkey, these interests have proven to be strong mobilizing forces in tackling the challenges that Uyghurs are currently confronted with, thus illustrating that the lived reality of Uyghur migrants encompasses more than merely seeking refuge and is tightly intertwined with the broader project of effectively responding to the situation in their homeland.

This paper is divided as follows. First, I discuss the pathways to statelessness among Uyghurs, including children living in Turkey whose Chinese passport expired while they were abroad and who find themselves unable to renew it, as well as those who failed to obtain Turkish citizenship before their passport’s expiration. Since Turkey does not grant *jus soli*,<sup>6</sup> the number of Uyghur children born in the country without any legal papers or proof of nationality is likely to grow in the coming years if the situation remains unaddressed. Second, I discuss the pathways to parent-child separation during the process of migration and resettlement, and the resulting “orphanhood” of Uyghur children living in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> These

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4. See Rousseau and Foxen, “Look me in the Eye.”

5. Zogl, “Telling Stories from Start to Finish,” 64. Matthew Zagor similarly stresses that these “governing narratives” and power imbalances operate to essentialise the refugee’s identity and undermine their narrative autonomy.” See “Recognition and Narrative Identities,” 313.

6. *Jus soli* refers to the granting of citizenship to all those born within the country’s territory, regardless of the parents’ own citizenship.

7. The term “orphan” appears to be used loosely by members of the Uyghur community to designate children who are living separated from one or both their parents. In our interviews and in articles by journalists, the term is often employed when a child/children’s parents are *missing* and it is impossible to determine if the parents are still alive or if they will ever be able to reunite with their children. One Uyghur participant in this study employed the term “orphan” to refer to Uyghur children who were only missing their father, explaining that the use of the term was justified by the fact that mothers are often not in the position to financially provide for their children. In her ethnographic study of Uyghur language schools in Turkey, Rebecca Clothey reports that some children considered “orphans” by one Uyghur school were not actually orphans or even unaccompanied, but were simply “left there by a remaining parent who was simply unable to provide for the child and so left their child in the care of the school.” See “Education and the Politics

are children whose parents were intending to make a brief trip to their homeland to settle their affairs or visit relatives and never returned, or who were deported to China or detained in deportation centres in Turkey. Uyghur organizations in Turkey estimate that there are currently approximately 500 “orphaned” children living in Turkey today, and an additional 500 children who are missing a parent. The vast majority of these children are likely stateless or at risk of becoming stateless. Finally, I explore how Uyghurs in Turkey have been responding to and addressing this situation. Specifically, I draw attention to how Uyghur-led educational initiatives have been promoting the best interests of young Uyghurs (by securing them new citizenship, for example) and strengthening the ability of the global Uyghur community to safeguard and transmit their identity to the next generation.

The data presented in this article is based, in part, on semi-structured virtual interviews conducted in the fall of 2020 and the winter of 2021 with Uyghurs currently or formerly residing in Istanbul, Turkey. These interviews were conducted with Uyghur asylum-seekers and local leaders. Data was also gathered through on-the-ground research conducted by the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project (URAP)—an NGO based in Ottawa, Canada—in the cities of Istanbul, Ankara, and Kayseri in the fall of 2018 and in the fall of 2020. From October to December 2018, the URAP collected personal information on 3,377 Uyghurs seeking asylum (1,585 adults and 1,792 minors), as well as short, hand-written testimonies from teenage and adult Uyghurs explaining the difficulties of obtaining Turkish citizenship. In a second trip to Turkey in September and October 2020, the URAP gathered testimonies and data on parent-child separation among Uyghurs. All the data collected by the URAP was made accessible for the purpose of this research.

### Current Situation in the Uyghur Region

The Uyghurs (also spelled “Uighurs”) are a predominantly Muslim, Turkic ethnic group, originating from Central and East Asia. In China, they are mostly concentrated in the northwestern province of Xinjiang (officially: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), referred to by Uyghurs as East Turkestan. In 2017, 11.3 million Uyghurs were reported to live in the region, totaling just over forty per cent of the total population according to the official count.<sup>8</sup> This proportion has likely decreased in the following years due to the increasing and evident effort of the CCP to expunge and/or assimilate the Uyghur population from the region through various policies, including forced sterilization, the mandatory insertion of intrauterine devices (IUDs),<sup>9</sup> incentives for Han Chinese to settle in the province,<sup>10</sup> forced marriages between Uyghur women and Han men,<sup>11</sup> as well as the displacement of Uyghur populations throughout

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of Cultural Survival for Uyghur Immigrants in Turkey,” *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* (2022): note 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2022.2045202>.

8. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

9. Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang* (Washington: The Jamestown Foundation, 2020). <https://jamestown.org/program/sterilizations-iuds-and-mandatory-birth-control-the-ccps-campaign-to-suppress-uyghur-birth-rates-in-xinjiang/>; Joanne Smith Finley, “Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear a Uyghur Genocide in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 3 (2021): 348–370, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1848109>.

10. Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control*; Li Wensheng, “‘Hanification’ of Xinjiang Through False Promises and Threats,” *Bitter Winter*, June 27, 2019.

11. Darren Byler, “Uyghur Love In A Time of Interethnic Marriage,” *SupChina*, August 7, 2019, <https://supchina.com/2019/08/07/uyghur-love-in-a-time-of-interethnic-marriage/>; Asim Kashgarian, “China Video Ad Calls for 100 Uighur Women to ‘Urgently’ Marry Han Men,” *Voice of America*, August 21, 2020,

China.<sup>12</sup>

These policies are part of a broader and unprecedented campaign that took off at full steam in 2017 under the province's new party Secretary, Chen Quanguo, who was transferred from the Tibet Autonomous Region in 2016 to deal with the so-called "threat" of Islamic extremism and terrorism in the Uyghur region.<sup>13</sup> This narrative, however, has undoubtedly served as a cover story to justify the mass-internment of Uyghurs. Due, in part, to earlier popular uprisings in the province<sup>14</sup> and the Uyghur's distinctive ethno-religious identity, the CCP has questioned the community's loyalty to the state.<sup>15</sup> In 2019, Adrian Zenz reported that, since about 2016, "up to 1.5 million predominantly Turkic minorities (notably Uyghur and Kazakh) were swept into different types of political re-education, detention and "training" camps."<sup>16</sup> The enormous number of detainees seems to support Sean Roberts' claim that "[w]hile there are reportedly criteria for being put into the camps, [...] detention appears to be quota-based and largely arbitrary," and further demonstrates that the "re-education" and "training" justifications used by the government are implausible.<sup>17</sup>

Conditions in the camps have been described as "prison-like."<sup>18</sup> Not only are detainees forced to practice the Chinese language and study CCP propaganda "for hours on end," Roberts explains that "there are numerous reports of severe torture plus multiple claims by former detainees of having been forced to take unidentified drugs."<sup>19</sup> Additionally, some facilities have been linked to forced labour,<sup>20</sup> and recent

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<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/china-video-ad-calls-100-uyghur-women-urgently-marry-han-men>.

12. Li Zaili, "Uyghurs Secretly Moved to Hide Mass Detentions," *Bitter Winter*, December 17, 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/uyghurs-moved-to-hide-mass-detentions/>; Li Ping, "Xinjiang Children Sent to Inland Schools for 'Sinicization,'" October 12, 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/xinjiang-children-sent-to-inland-schools-for-sinicization/>; Ruth Ingram, "CCP Stepping Up the Pace of Uyghur Forced Labor into Inner China," *Bitter Winter*, May 23, 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/ccp-stepping-up-the-pace-of-uyghur-forced-labor-into-inner-china/>; Adrian Zenz, "Beyond the Camps: Beijing's Long-Term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang," *Journal of Political Risk* 7, no. 12 (December 2019).

13. Smith Finley, "Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear"; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici, "Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang," *International Security* 44, no. 3 (2020), [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00368](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00368); Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*.

14. Two events in particular have contributed to this: the Ghulja Massacre of 1997, and the Ürümqi Riots of 2009. See Peter Irwin, "Remembering the Ghulja Incident: 20th Anniversary of 'Uyghur Tiananmen' Passes With Little Notice," *The Diplomat*, March 2, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/remembering-the-ghulja-incident-20th-anniversary-of-uyghur-tiananmen-passes-with-little-notice/>; James A. Millward, "Introduction: Does the 2009 Urumchi Violence Mark A Turning Point?," *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 4 (2009): 2–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930903577128>; Smith Finley, "Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear."

15. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*.

16. Adrian Zenz, "Break Their Roots: Evidence for China's Parent-Child Separation Campaign in Xinjiang," *Journal of Political Risk* 7, no. 7 (2019), <https://www.jpolorisk.com/break-their-roots-evidence-for-chinas-parent-child-separation-campaign-in-xinjiang/>.

17. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 2.

18. Massimo Introvigne, "Yingye'er Re-education Camp Managed Like Prison (Video)," *Bitter Winter*, December 11, 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/yingyeer-re-education-camp-managed-like-prison/>; Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*; Chang Xin, "Xinjiang Camps Were Built as Prisons, Their Builders Expose," *Bitter Winter*, March 14, 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/xinjiang-camps-were-built-as-prisons/>.

19. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*.

20. Zenz, "Beyond the Camps"; Helen Davidson, "Xinjiang: More Than Half A Million Forced to Pick Cotton, Report Suggests," *The Guardian*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/15/xinjiang-china-more-than-half-a-million-forced-to-pick-cotton-report-finds>.

reports even mention the existence of “systemic rape.”<sup>21</sup>

Outside the camps, Xinjiang has been called an “Orwellian surveillance state”<sup>22</sup> and an “outdoor prison.”<sup>23</sup> Uyghurs are closely monitored by heavily guarded checkpoints at various locations, as well as by acute electronic surveillance—reported to be required inside some homes<sup>24</sup>—and are also compelled to host a “Han relative” in their homes for several days every month.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in what appears to be an attempt at thwarting the transmission of their religious and cultural identity, the freedoms of Uyghurs have been increasingly restricted; books promoting Uyghur culture and nationalism are now banned,<sup>26</sup> teachers and students at Uyghur schools and universities are required to speak in Chinese rather than in Uyghur,<sup>27</sup> traditional Uyghur houses have been destroyed and their residents have been displaced to apartment blocks,<sup>28</sup> and the practice of Islam has become almost criminalized,<sup>29</sup> with mosques and Muslim burial grounds being either destroyed or damaged.<sup>30</sup> In addition, many Uyghurs report having experienced incessant police harassment for a variety of activities—such as possessing an illegal book, praying, having traveled to a Muslim majority country in the past, receiving calls from abroad (often from relatives), having

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21. Matthew Hill, David Campanale, and Joel Gunter, “‘Their goal is to destroy everyone’: Uighur Camp Detainees Allege Systematic Rape,” *BBC News*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55794071>.

22. Ruth Ingram, “The Orwellian Life in Xinjiang Campuses,” *Bitter Winter*, December 28, 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/the-orwellian-life-in-xinjiang-campuses/>; Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*.

23. Xiang Yi, “Xinjiang: The Largest Outdoor Prison in the World,” *Bitter Winter*, March 29, 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/xinjiang-the-largest-outdoor-prison-in-the-world/>.

24. Chang Xin, “Uyghurs Oppressed in Every Facet of Life,” *Bitter Winter*, February 6, 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/uyghurs-oppressed-in-every-facet-of-life/>; Lin Yijiang, “Traveler’s Impressions: Prisonlike Conditions of Xinjiang,” *Bitter Winter*, April 13, 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/travelers-impressions-prisonlike-conditions-of-xinjiang/>.

25. Steven Jiang, “Chinese Uyghurs Forced to Welcome Communist Party Into Their Homes,” *CNN*, May 14, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/14/asia/china-xinjiang-home-stays-intl/index.html>; Dake Kang and Yanan Wang, “Chinese Uighurs Assigned ‘Relatives’ Accused of Spying for The State,” *Global News* November 30, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/4714744/chinese-uyghurs-assigned-relatives/>; Darren Byler, “China’s Nightmare Homestay,” *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/26/china-nightmare-homestay-xinjiang-uyghur-monitor/>.

26. Dake Kang, “Correction: China-Xinjiang-Banished Textbooks Story,” *Associated Press*, September 3, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/4f5f57213e3546ab9bd1be01dfb510d3>.

27. Darren Byler, “Xinjiang Education Reform and the Eradication of Uyghur-Language Books,” *SupChina* October 2, 2019, <https://supchina.com/2019/10/02/xinjiang-education-reform-and-the-eradication-of-uyghur-language-books/>; Sun Kairui, “Uyghur Students Taught to Neglect Native Language and Culture,” *Bitter Winter*, September 16, 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/uyghur-students-taught-to-neglect-native-language-and-culture/>.

28. Massimo Introvigne, “Uyghur Traditional Houses Destroyed by the CCP: Another Tool of Cultural Genocide,” *Bitter Winter*, July 11, 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/uyghur-traditional-houses-destroyed-by-the-ccp/>.

29. Massimo Introvigne, “Uyghurs Are Forced to Denounce Their Faith to Survive,” September 11, 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/uyghurs-are-forced-to-denounce-their-faith-to-survive/>; Maya Wang, “More Evidence of China’s Horrific Abuses in Xinjiang,” *Human Rights Watch*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/20/more-evidence-chinas-horrific-abuses-xinjiang>; Bitter Winter, “Voices from Xinjiang: Bitter Winter Interviews Victims of Persecution,” *Bitter Winter*, July 23, 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/voices-from-xinjiang/>; Li Zaili, “Xinjiang Muslims Forced to Shave off Beards,” *Bitter Winter*, January 6, 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/xinjiang-muslims-forced-to-shave-off-beards/>.

30. Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, “China Is Erasing Mosques and Precious Shrines in Xinjiang,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/25/world/asia/xinjiang-china-religious-site.html>; Helen Davidson, “Thousands of Xinjiang Mosques Destroyed or Damaged, Report Finds,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/25/thousands-of-xinjiang-mosques-destroyed-damaged-china-report-finds>; Matt Rivers, “More Than 100 Uyghur Graveyards Demolished By Chinese Authorities, Satellite Images Show,” *CNN*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/02/asia/xinjiang-uyghur-graveyards-china-intl-hnk/index.html>.

a politically active relative abroad, etc. Such experiences have exacerbated and maintained a strong climate of fear among Uyghurs in China.<sup>31</sup>

This unprecedented campaign has had a direct impact on Uyghur children. Darren Byler explains that “[t]ens of thousands of the children of those detained have become wards of the state and are being raised in state-run facilities that center around Chinese language education and Han cultural values and practices.”<sup>32</sup> According to Zenz, boarding schools for Uyghur children, which reports describe as “jail-like,”<sup>33</sup> have been created to manage the fallout of the ongoing campaign against Uyghurs. The CCP deliberately creates “orphans” by detaining Uyghur parents, thus allowing the state to assume a parental role. Zenz argues that the upbringing of so-called Uyghur “orphans” in these “boarding schools,” where their Muslim and Uyghur identities are systematically obliterated, constitutes “a core mechanism within Xinjiang’s long-term cultural genocide approach,” which is an essential part of the CCP’s “coercive project of social re-engineering [in Xinjiang province].”<sup>34</sup>

The situation in Xinjiang has strongly impacted members of the Uyghur community living in the diaspora. For many, transmitting the Uyghur language, faith and culture to the next generation has taken on new importance. It is partly for this reason that many Uyghurs fleeing China have decided to settle in Turkey. According to Mettursun Beydulla, “[b]ecause of Turkey’s ancestral, historical, linguistic and cultural ties [with the Uyghur people], it has been the most attractive destination for Uyghurs looking to escape the influence of Communism.”<sup>35</sup> Today, Turkey hosts the largest Uyghur community outside of China. As of February 2021, over 50,000 Uyghurs are estimated to be living in the country.<sup>36</sup> According to an article from *The Guardian* published in May 2020, approximately 11,000 of this number arrived “recently,” fleeing persecution in their homeland.<sup>37</sup>

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31. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*.

32. Darren Byler, “Uyghur Human Rights Violations in Northwest China,” *University of Washington*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/SDIR/Brief/BR10230024/br-external/BylerDarren-e.pdf>.

33. Ruth Ingram, “Now They Come for the Uyghur Children: Thousands Sent to Jail-Like Boarding Schools,” *Bitter Winter*, October 18, 2020, [https://bitterwinter.org/now-they-come-for-the-uyghur-children-thousands-sent-to-jail-like-boarding-schools/?fbclid=IwAR0YOeWkc3-C\\_GTpC4LGBG1h3WWOx2\\_R\\_fvsfJxOr\\_WD-umVhI9HRmP-Vrw](https://bitterwinter.org/now-they-come-for-the-uyghur-children-thousands-sent-to-jail-like-boarding-schools/?fbclid=IwAR0YOeWkc3-C_GTpC4LGBG1h3WWOx2_R_fvsfJxOr_WD-umVhI9HRmP-Vrw); Chang Xin, “Video: Uyghur Children Indoctrinated in Camps,” *Bitter Winter*, January 29, 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/video-uyghur-children-indoctrinated-in-camps/>.

34. “Parent-Child Separation in Yarkand County, Kashgar,” *Medium*, October 15, 2020, <https://adrianzenz.medium.com/story-45d07b25bcad>.

35. Mettursun Beydulla, “Experiences of Uyghur Migration to Turkey and the United States: Issues of Religion, Law, Society, Residence, and Citizenship,” in *Migration and Islamic Ethics: Issues of Residence, Naturalization and Citizenship*, ed. Ray Jureidini and Said Fares Hassan (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 180–81. See also Mettursun Beydulla, “Struggles and Dilemmas of Uyghur Immigrants in Turkey,” in *Understanding Ethnic, Religious and Cultural Minorities in Turkey*, ed. Anja Zalta, Tahir Abbas, and Umut Azak (Ljubljana: Scientific Publishing House Annales ZRS Koperand, 2021).

36. Dake Kang and Suzan Fraser, “Turkey Uighurs Fear Sellout to China In Exchange For Vaccine,” *Associated Press*, February 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-beijing-coronavirus-pandemic-ankara-china-c8b714974552c484c501a5784efc117a>; Beydulla, “Struggles and Dilemmas.”

37. While there is no specific indication of time, we can presume that it refers to the timeframe between 2016 and 2020. See Bethan McKernan, “‘I Miss My Homeland’: Fearful Uighurs Celebrate Eid In Exile In Turkey,” *The Guardian*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/24/fearful-uyghurs-celebrate-eid-in-exile-in-turkey>.

### Pathways to Statelessness in Turkey

With respect to refugee claims, Turkey is a unique place. Though the country receives a continuous flow of asylum-seekers from Asia and Africa, it is one of the few states that retains the geographic limitation of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and, therefore, only provides protection for “people fleeing events occurring within Europe.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the vast majority of asylum-seekers in Turkey are only granted temporary or ad hoc status until they are accepted as a refugee in another country or are able to safely return to their country of origin, and, as a result, many live in the country without any legal status.<sup>39</sup>

The case of Uyghur asylum-seekers in Turkey is also unique. Since 1952, Turkey has provided support to Uyghurs fleeing the communist occupation of their homeland by offering temporary or permanent residence permits.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these permits facilitated the migration of Uyghurs to Turkey and the establishment of diasporic communities in Istanbul, Ankara, Kayseri, and Konya, which allowed many Uyghurs to become naturalized citizens.<sup>41</sup> Following the recent wave of migration stemming from the ongoing genocide in China,<sup>42</sup> however, an increasing proportion of Uyghurs are now living in Turkey with only a residence permit, or are awaiting such a permit. With more Uyghurs applying for residence permits, Bethan McKernan notes in *The Guardian* that “[r]esidency paperwork is now harder to obtain,” leaving “about 2,000 [Uyghurs settled in Turkey] without the legal right to stay.”<sup>43</sup>

According to Noora Lori, the granting of temporary or ad hoc statuses – which she categorizes as a form of “precarious citizenship” – has a detrimental impact on the lives of migrants. Because these statuses

38. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted July 28, 1951, entered into force April 22, 1954) 189 UNTS 137 (Refugee Convention) art 33.

39. Feyzi Baban, Suzan Ilcan, and Kim Rygiel, “Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Pathways to Precarity, Differential Inclusion, and Negotiated Citizenship Rights,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1192996>; Elif Sarı and Gizem Dinçer, “Toward a New Asylum Regime in Turkey?,” *Movements Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017), <https://movements-journal.org/issues/05.turkey/05.sari,dincer--new-asylum-regime-turkey.html>.

40. Beydulla, “Experiences of Uyghur Migration.”

41. According to the URAP and to interviewees, there is no clear path towards obtaining Turkish citizenship for Uyghurs. Some Uyghurs have secured citizenship quickly, while others have been unable to obtain it for years without knowing why. Among those who were able to secure Turkish citizenship, the most common paths appear to be through marriage with a Turkish citizen, with the help of naturalized relatives vouching on behalf of the applicant, or as a result of lobbying efforts from the Uyghur community, which have at times resulted in the granting citizenship status to a number of Uyghurs.

42. In this article I use the term “genocide” to refer to the on-going situation facing the Uyghur people in their homeland. As I write this article, there are still debates as to whether the situation in China constitutes a “genocide.” However, scholars and politicians are increasingly adopting the term. See Smith Finley, “Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear”; Edward Wong and Chris Buckley, “U.S. Says China’s Repression of Uighurs Is ‘Genocide,’” January 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/us/politics/trump-china-xinjiang.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytimes&s=09>; “Statement by the Subcommittee on International Human Rights Concerning the Human Rights Situation of Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, China,” House of Commons, October 21, 2020, accessed December 30, 2020, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/SDIR/newsrelease/10903199?fbclid=IwARlappPwXl3IDxOMJvWWyQeVenMtaA6FQcqKqRSAJpt6rMuIEJEaI-Xe78>; Emerald Bensadoun, “Vote Passes Recognizing China’s Treatment of Uighurs As Genocide,” *Global News*, February 22, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7655145/conservatives-liberals-uyghur-genocide-vote/>. Moreover, based on interviews and discussions with members of the Uyghur community, the term “genocide” appears to provide an accurate depiction of the events unfolding in the Uyghur region.

43. McKernan, “I Miss My Homeland.”

are “experienced as a protracted waiting,”<sup>44</sup> they affect the migrants’ sense of security and stability, and can also hinder their capacity to start over in a new environment. Indeed, Beydulla notes that the allocation of both temporary and long-term residence permits to Uyghurs has had the effect of placing them in a “state of limbo”—they may legally reside in the country but are not entitled to the same rights and privileges as Turkish citizens. Beydulla observes that, as a result, “many do not have legal or social protection and live on the charity of Turkish people,” and, accordingly, that they must “deal with various authorities [in pursuit of work],” and thus “live in constant insecurity, stress and fear.”<sup>45</sup>

With respect to dilemmas about citizenship, Lori notes that “[t]he decision to exclude or incorporate particular groups can [...] be driven by foreign relations.”<sup>46</sup> This appears to be the case for Turkey. Indeed, Nilgün Eliküçük Yıldırım contends that many Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries have “remain[ed] silent about the Uyghur issue” due to “China’s economic presence.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Zan Tao attributes Turkey’s inaction to the country’s desire to develop stronger bilateral relations with China, increasingly seen as an alternative economic partner to the West.<sup>48</sup> In this endeavor, both authors similarly explain that Turkey has been called to limit its “disagreements with Beijing [...] to verbal discord.”<sup>49</sup>

As Abdullah Ayasun suggests in *The Diplomat*, this situation may explain why Turkey signed (yet has not ratified<sup>50</sup>) an extradition treaty with China in 2017, which requires both countries to “extradite to each other persons found in its territory and wanted by the other Party for the purpose of conducting criminal proceedings against or executing sentence imposed on those persons.”<sup>51</sup> Since then, a small number of Uyghurs have reportedly been deported to China,<sup>52</sup> hundreds are said to be held in deportation centres in Turkey,<sup>53</sup> and journalists note that the fear of deportation has grown considerably among Uyghurs without Turkish citizenship.<sup>54</sup>

Though it is preferable to possess a residence permit than to have no legal status at all, such permits are precarious as they offer very little security to Uyghurs. For instance, holders of a long-term residence

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44. Noora Lori, “Statelessness, ‘In-Between’ Statuses, and Precarious Citizenship,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, ed. Ayelet Shachar et al. (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 762.

45. Beydulla, “Experiences of Uyghur Migration,” 184.

46. Lori, “Statelessness, ‘In-Between Statuses,’” 751.

47. Eliküçük Yıldırım, “Rigid Boundaries between Turkey and China: Is Political Mobility Possible?,” *Turkish Studies* 22, no. 1 (2021): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2020.1716191>.

48. Zan Tao, “An Alternative Partner to the West? China’s Growing Relations with Turkey,” in *Toward Well-Oiled Relations?: China’s Presence in the Middle East Following the Arab Spring*, ed. Niv Horesh, The Nottingham China Policy Institute series (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

49. Eliküçük Yıldırım, “Rigid Boundaries between Turkey and China,” 41.

50. Nonetheless, in December 2020 political commentators worried that China might use the extradition deal “as a bargaining chip to boost its investments in Turkey and increase sales of its coronavirus vaccine in the country.” See: “Turkey Facing Delayed China Vaccine Amid Controversial Extradition Deal,” *Arab News*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1784231/middle-east>.

51. Abdullah Ayasun, “Uyghurs Wary of Turkey’s Pending Extradition Deal With China,” *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/uyghurs-wary-of-turkeys-pending-extradition-deal-with-china/>.

52. Jilil Kashgary and Erkin Emet, “Uyghur Mother, Daughters Deported to China From Turkey,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deportation-08092019171834.html>.

53. Christian Shepherd and Ayla Jean Yackley, “Turkey’s Uighurs Fear for Future After China Deportation,” *Financial Times*, August 24, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/caee8cac-c3f4-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9>.

54. Ayasun, “Uyghurs Wary of Turkey’s Pending Extradition Deal With China”; Helen Davidson and Bethan McKernan, “Pressure on Turkey to Protect Uighurs as China Ratifies Extradition Treaty,” *The Guardian*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/29/pressure-on-turkey-to-protect-uighurs-as-china-ratifies-extradition-treaty>; Carlotta Gall, “They Built a Homeland Far From China’s Grip. Now They’re Afraid,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/21/world/asia/xinjiang-turkey-china-muslims-fear.html>.



permit, which is usually valid until 2099 or simply identified as “permanent,” must be in possession of a valid passport in order to apply for a work permit. Those who hold a short-term residence permit, which are usually valid for a maximum of two years, can only apply for a renewal once, and must also have a valid passport.<sup>55</sup> Since 2017, however, Uyghurs throughout the diaspora have encountered overwhelming obstacles to renewing their passports; a situation which has led the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) to predict a “looming crisis of statelessness”<sup>56</sup> among Uyghurs in the diaspora.

In their report, entitled *Weaponized Passports: The Crisis of Uyghur Statelessness*, the UHRP reveal that a number of Uyghurs living in the diaspora who attempted to renew their passports from a Chinese Embassy were at risk of having their passports cancelled. Some who attempted to renew them anyway (often at the last minute to avoid losing their valid passport before it reached its expiry date) were required to hand over information on their family members (names, workplaces, addresses, etc.) beforehand; others were required to obtain authorizations from their hometown in China to fill-out the passport application, which would have required the help of a local relative or friend in their homeland. However, given the current context, many Uyghurs have either lost contact with their relatives in China or are afraid to contact them as it could cause them to be arrested. As a result, they are often unable to obtain the information required for their passport application. Even those who are in possession of the required information may not wish to disclose it for fear it may put their relatives in danger, giving the Chinese authorities power over them from afar.

Another pathway to statelessness described in the 2020 UHRP report, which has the potential of becoming more common due to the ongoing passport crisis, involves those who flee China without documents or with false papers. According to the UHRP, this strategy is employed by Uyghurs who fear deportation if they are caught in a foreign country with a Chinese passport.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the threat of deportation is a real concern for those seeking a new life outside of China. One of the most daunting strategies the CCP has employed to control Uyghurs living abroad has been to require Uyghurs with an expiring passport to apply for a renewal in person. A number of Uyghurs in the diaspora have reported being offered “one-way travel documents” to China instead of a passport renewal application.<sup>58</sup> Though they were able to reject this offer, the UHRP notes that the decision not to go to China to renew their passport may still put Uyghurs at risk: “[i]f a Uyghur decides not to return to China and to continue living overseas with an expired passport, the Chinese police [...] not only maintain surveillance over these individuals but [are] also aware of their legal status, leaving them open to state pressure.”<sup>59</sup> This is a serious concern for Uyghurs living in Turkey who could be at risk of deportation.

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55. According to the URAP and interviewees, the Turkish immigration system is somewhat erratic, leaving many Uyghurs unable to determine if, or when, they will be able to obtain a residence permit or citizenship. While some of the information presented above can be corroborated by governmental websites—See, for example, “Residence Permit Types,” 2019, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/residence-permit-types>; or “Work Permit,” 2019, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/work-permit>—the regulations do not seem to apply equally. For example, some interviewees mentioned that it was possible for some Uyghurs to obtain a long-term residence permit quickly, despite Turkey’s official regulations which stipulate that they can only be attributed to those who have held “continuous residence in Turkey for at least eight years” (“Residence Permit Types”).

56. Uyghur Human Rights Project, *Weaponized Passports: the Crisis of Uyghur Statelessness*, World Uyghur Congress (Washington, DC, April 14, 2020), 3, <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/weaponized-passports-the-crisis-of-uyghur-state-lessness/>.

57. UHRP, *Weaponized Passports*, 23–24.

58. UHRP, *Weaponized Passports*, 10.

59. UHRP, *Weaponized Passports*, 23.

For Uyghurs who hold a residence permit, the situation is worrying. Those who fail to renew their passport before its expiration date and have not yet been naturalized or accepted as a refugee in a third country will become *de facto* stateless, despite officially being Chinese nationals. While those with a long-term residence permit might not lose their right to stay in Turkey, they risk losing their employment if their work permits are revoked as a result of not holding a valid passport. Moreover, this situation leaves Uyghurs who hold any type of residence permit feeling particularly vulnerable, as they fear their permits could easily be revoked altogether, leaving them undocumented. Given China's economic presence in Turkey and its unprecedented campaign to eradicate the Uyghur people, their concern is well founded.

This situation places a heavy burden on the shoulders of Uyghur migrants to secure citizenship or refugee status before their passports expire. Moreover, since Turkey does not adhere to the *jus soli* doctrine, children born to parents who have not been naturalized are born without any legal papers of proof of nationality. Those who become stateless face being deprived of the rights and privileges that usually accompany citizenship.<sup>60</sup> As a Uyghur father explained to the UHRP, not having access to a legal status in Turkey places Uyghurs in a particularly precarious situation:

Without the proper papers, I'll have no livelihood, my children cannot attend school, and I cannot even get a driver's license. My wife makes bedding at home and I sell it in the bazaar as a street vendor. That's how we are getting by. Uyghurs without papers like me are in the bazaar selling goods. We rent stalls daily and no one asks any questions. There are about 300 Uyghurs doing this kind of business.<sup>61</sup>

While Article 1(1) of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons<sup>62</sup> requires those party to the treaty to offer protection to individuals “who [are] not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law” (i.e., *de jure* stateless), it only recommends protecting those who are *de facto* stateless.<sup>63</sup> However, in the context of a genocide or an ethnocide, claiming that members of the targeted group are not *de jure* stateless simply because they still have citizenship in their home country is problematic. Though Uyghurs seeking asylum abroad are still registered with a Chinese *hukou* (i.e., household registration) and are recognized by China as nationals, the CCP's narrative characterizes Uyghur history, culture, language, and religion as alien, undesirable, and irrelevant to the concept of “China” as a nation state, thereby justifying China's campaign to eradicate and assimilate the Uyghur population. Seen in this light, not offering protection to stateless Uyghurs, or allowing them to be deported back to China, could be viewed as a breach of the 1954 Stateless Convention, which Turkey has been a party to since 2015.<sup>64</sup>

### **Pathways to Parent-Child Separation**

The state of crisis in the Uyghur region has resulted in many children being separated from their parents, not only in China, but also in the diaspora. There appear to be two main patterns of parent-child

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60. Amal de Chickera and Laura van Waas, “Unpacking Statelessness,” in *Understanding Statelessness*, ed. Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss, and Phillip Cole (London: Routledge, 2017).

61. UHRP, *Weaponized Passports*, 6–7.

62. Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (adopted September 28, 1954, entered into force June 6, 1960) 360 UNTS 117 (Convention on Statelessness) art 39.

63. de Chickera and van Waas, “Unpacking Statelessness.”

64. For more on this, see “Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons,” [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetailsII.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=V-3&chapter=5&Temp=mtdsg2&clang=en](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetailsII.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=V-3&chapter=5&Temp=mtdsg2&clang=en).

separation: namely, “flight-related separation,” which occurred most often before 2016, and “return-related separation,” which occurred mainly in 2016, but also in the years following.

Flight-related separation mainly arose when Uyghurs could still legally leave China with valid travel documents (i.e., mainly before 2016–2017). This form of separation is rooted in the obstacles Uyghur parents encountered as they fled their homeland. For Uyghurs, the process of obtaining a passport has historically been long, costly, and unpredictable;<sup>65</sup> this led some parents, fearing detention, to leave their homeland with their passport-holding children and place those without a passport in the care of a relative or friend until they could manage to obtain one. In some cases, however, the children’s caregivers were arrested and detained before the parents could retrieve them, thus causing the children to be taken into custody by the Chinese state. Some parents who were interviewed for this paper have no idea where their children are today.<sup>66</sup>

Another reason why some children were left in the custody of a relative or friend is that parents were concerned that travelling with too many children at once would get them in trouble with the authorities. In recent decades, Uyghurs have commonly had more children than are permitted under China’s policies (i.e., two for families living in urban areas and three for those living in rural areas). While violations of such policies used to be dealt with by paying fines, since 2015, having more than three children has come to be associated with “religious extremism.”<sup>67</sup> Consequently, some parents left their homeland without all of their children and planned to return to fetch the others later. Other parents opted to travel individually at different times, with each parent accompanying some of their children. While this strategy worked for some families, others were split up when one of the parents did not make it out of the country.<sup>68</sup> When a parent is detained, their children are often placed in state custody, especially if the rest of the family is living in the diaspora.<sup>69</sup>

A less common pattern of flight-related separation has also been reported. This form of separation, which affects children in Turkey, happens when a parent dies in the course of migrating. A Uyghur teacher in Istanbul explains:

Some [children] while escaping China through Thailand and Malaysia saw their parents die in front of them. Some witnessed their parents shot and two of the children saw their parents swept away by a river.<sup>70</sup>

The second pattern of parent-child separation—return-related separation—became a problem in 2016 at the onset of the passport crisis, when children living in the diaspora lost their parents when they had to return to China. There are at least two trajectories that lead to this form of separation. The first involves parents who decided to travel to China to visit relatives or settle affairs (e.g., to sell their house or land) with the full intention of returning to Turkey afterwards. In 2016, right before the CCP’s crackdown grew in intensity and was exposed by the international media, many Uyghurs assumed the situation in their homeland was

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65. UHRP, *Weaponized Passports*.

66. One father interviewed showed a CCP propaganda video circulating on the internet, in which he spotted his son who is in China (interview 2020, November 12). The video aimed to promote the state boarding schools where Uyghur children are sent.

67. Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control*.

68. Abduwelli Ayup, “Divided Uighur families Struggle to Build New Lives in Turkey,” *Deutsche Welle*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/divided-uyghur-families-struggle-to-build-new-lives-in-turkey/a-47564460>.

69. URAP interviews, 2018, October–December; interviews, 2020, October–November.

70. Lokman Hira’i quoted in Ruth Ingram, “Miracle in Istanbul: A Uyghur School in the Turkish Exile,” *Bitter Winter*, September 1, 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/uyghur-school-in-the-turkish-exile/>.

sufficiently stable to warrant returning. However, upon their arrival in China, or at some point during their stay, many had their passports revoked and some were detained, preventing them from returning to Turkey. The children left behind in Turkey thus became “de facto orphans,” not knowing when, or if, their parents would return.<sup>71</sup> Many of the children who were “orphaned” in this way had only one parent in Turkey to begin with, which was often the result of a previous flight-related separation.

The second cause of return-related separation involves the deportation of Uyghurs to China, or their detention in Turkish deportation centers,<sup>72</sup> which became a problem after Turkey signed the extradition treaty with China in 2017. In some cases, people reported seeing a Uyghur being arrested; while, in other cases, children reported the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of a parent—sometimes their only parent in Turkey—which left them to fend for themselves.<sup>73</sup>

According to a Uyghur spokesperson from Mavi Hilal, a charitable organization based in Istanbul, there are, at the very least, 514 Uyghur children who have lost either their father or both parents as a result of the genocide in the Uyghur region. This estimation is based on the number of applications for support received by the Nuzugum Cultural and Family Foundation, a partner Uyghur charity organization. The organization estimates that the total number of children missing a parent is around 1,000, since not all are registered at the Nuzugum Foundation. Those without any parent in the country, in particular those who are cared for by a so-called Uyghur “orphanage,” may not be registered at the Foundation.<sup>74</sup> According to Joanna Kakissis from *National Public Radio*, in 2020, between 350 and 700 parentless Uyghur children were living in Turkey.<sup>75</sup> In 2019, Durrie Bouscaren from *The World* estimated that there were 400 such “orphans.”<sup>76</sup> These numbers align with Mavi Hilal’s total estimate of there being roughly 1000 children with missing parents, as most of the 514 records held by the Nuzugum Foundation belong to children of “single” mothers and are not accounted for in the newspaper reports.<sup>77</sup>

Many of the unaccompanied children in Turkey are being looked after by members of the local Uyghur community with the financial support of the global Uyghur community. There are various Uyghur schools that provide accommodation for unaccompanied children. In areas where the Uyghur community is smaller, these children will be placed with a host Uyghur family. According to the Uyghur spokesperson

71. Durrie Bouscaren, “In Turkey, A Boarding School Cares For Uighur Children Separated From Their Parents,” *The World*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-11-20/turkey-boarding-school-cares-uighur-children-separated-their-parents#:~:text=Community%20leaders%20say%20up%20to,within%20the%20past%20five%20years>; “Hundreds of Uighur Refugee Children Are Orphans in Turkey After Parents Disappear,” *The New Arab* 2 January 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/1/2/hundreds-of-uighur-refugee-children-are-orphans-in-turkey>.

72. Uyghurs are detained under the pretence of being terrorist suspects, which they vehemently deny. See Beydulla, “Struggles and Dilemmas of Uyghur Immigrants in Turkey,” 208–209; Ayasun, “Uyghurs Wary of Turkey’s Pending Extradition Deal With China.”

73. Joanna Kakissis, “‘Somewhere Like Home’: Uighur Kids Find A Haven At Boarding School In Turkey,” *National Public Radio*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/15/798662027/somewhere-like-home-uighur-kids-find-a-haven-at-boarding-school-in-turkey>.

74. Interview January 1, 2021.

75. Kakissis, “Somewhere Like Home.”

76. “In Turkey, a boarding school cares for Uighur children separated from their parents.”

77. The Nuzugum Foundation considers children raised by “single” mothers as “orphans,” since, in many cases, the mothers struggle to support their children financially. They may not speak Turkish or have any professional skills (many used to be stay-at-home moms), and some are over 50 years old, all of which complicates finding employment (spokesperson from Mavi Hilal, interview 2020, January 1). This is without taking into account the mothers’ precarious citizenship statuses, which makes finding stable employment all the more challenging.

from Mavi Hilal and the URAP, approximately fifty children live with Uyghur host families in Kayseri, where there is no Uyghur “orphanage.”<sup>78</sup>

From the perspective of separated Uyghur children, who are often asylum-seekers, not having a parent in Turkey is highly challenging. According to Habibullah Kuseni, the principal of Oku Uyghur Bilig Yurdu—a Uyghur language school in Selimpaşa, Istanbul, in which 250 Uyghurs, including forty “orphans,” are enrolled—none of the children attending his school have Turkish citizenship: approximately ninety per cent have a residence permit, while the remaining ten per cent have filed applications for residence permits but have not yet heard back.<sup>79</sup> The Uyghur spokesperson from Mavi Hilal claims that the vast majority of Uyghur “orphans” do not have Turkish citizenship, and, moreover, that those with citizenship had help getting it from a direct relative (e.g., an aunt or an uncle) who already had citizenship. However, these situations are pretty rare.<sup>80</sup> Since parents are normally the ones who apply for their children’s residence permit or citizenship, unaccompanied Uyghur children are at increased risk of being stateless.

Uyghurs parents living in Turkey who were separated from their children in China report that having a child in the custody of the Chinese state has been used as an intimidation technique. Two Uyghur fathers interviewed for this study described how they were contacted by Chinese authorities through the messaging app WeChat and were then put on a call with their lost children. On the WeChat video call, one father claims that, not only did his son appear to not recognize him, he also only spoke in Chinese, which meant that the father needed to rely on the Chinese state official’s translation to understand what his son was saying. Both fathers were told to immediately stop their involvement in any form of political engagement against China in Turkey, and to hand over the names of other politically engaged Uyghurs in order to ensure the well-being of their child.<sup>81</sup> While it is well known that the CCP uses this technique of holding relatives hostage to control Uyghurs in the diaspora,<sup>82</sup> it is particularly troubling in the context of parent-child separation.

### **Addressing the Plight of Uyghur Children: The Role of the Uyghur School**

The picture of Uyghur migrants in Turkey painted above highlights the interest that Uyghurs have in securing new citizenship. In this concluding section, I draw connections between the literature on statelessness and Uyghur migrants’ responses to the situation they find themselves in due to the crisis in their homeland. Specifically, I explore the role played by Uyghur-led educational initiatives in Turkey in addressing the needs of young Uyghur migrants. By looking at the multiple functions that one of these schools occupies in the Uyghur community, my aim is to highlight that, for Uyghur migrants, seeking refuge and citizenship in a new country does not exhaust the full experience of refugee resettlement. For many, this experience is inseparable from the broader project of *responding* to the situation that the Uyghur people are facing—and education has been one way to accomplish that.

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78. Interview January 1, 2021.

79. Interview December 6, 2020.

80. Interview January 1, 2021.

81. Interview November 6, 2020, and interview November 12, 2020.

82. Ellen Halliday, “Uighurs Can’t Escape Chinese Repression, Even in Europe,” *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/china-threatens-uighurs-europe/596347/>; Paul Mooney and David Lague, “The Price of Dissent: Holding the Fate of Families in its Hands, China Controls Refugees Abroad,” *Reuters*, December 30, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-uighur/>.

This type of concern, however central to the members of the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey, is unlikely to be given any consideration in the official system that hears Uyghur refugee claims. In fact, Rousseau and Foxen have found that, in the Canadian context at least, refugee applicants' desire for retaliation and/or anger at the lack of consideration for their situation are not received positively, and claimants are often placed in the position of having to repress these emotions.<sup>83</sup> In what follows, I aim to draw attention to the fact that, while these emotions may not be considered in the process of seeking refuge, and are also not necessarily resolved by the obtainment of new citizenship, they nonetheless appear to represent a powerful force around which members of the Uyghur community converge to find ways to effectively address the situation they find themselves in, and thus have played a pivotal role in the reorganization of Uyghur migrants' lives in Turkey.

### **Statelessness and Uyghur Children's Best Interests**

Statelessness among children is a particularly alarming issue because, first and foremost, children rely on the state for crucial aspects of their life and development. As stipulated in the preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>84</sup> children are not "fully prepared to live an individual life in society," and thus are "entitled to special care and assistance." This implies, among other things, that states must guarantee children the right to an open future—which is to say, states must afford children all rights required to ensure "that, as an adult, [they] will be in a position to exercise [their] full set of rights."<sup>85</sup> This implies, for example, that children have the right to receive an education that will allow them to navigate society autonomously and make plans for their future according to their own preferences when they become adults.

A key aspect of a child's right to an open future is their ability to obtain effective citizenship. Because Uyghur asylum-seekers living in the diaspora do not have effective citizenship, ensuring that they can secure a new one, which would entitle them to the same rights as other citizens in their host country, is essential. For Uyghur participants in this research, it was clear that the rights of children ought to be prioritized over the right of states to protect their national boundaries. Granting Uyghur children new citizenship would be the foundation of a stable and secure life, and the minimal requirement to ensuring their right to an open future in a context where they are unable to return to their homeland. Citizenship is therefore seen as essential to ensuring that the basic human rights of Uyghur children are respected. As Jacqueline Bhabha explains:

Statelessness [...] is potentially devastating for a child because it jeopardizes the child's automatic claim to inclusion by and attention from the state. It is therefore a key indicator of vulnerability, a proxy for problematic access to essential resources, services, and protections.<sup>86</sup>

According to Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss, and Phillip Cole, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that statelessness and other forms of precarious citizenship are not passed down from generation to

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83. See Rousseau and Foxen, "Look Me in the Eye."

84. Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

85. Archard in Patti Tamara Lenard, "The Right to Family: Protecting Stateless Children," in *Understanding Statelessness*, ed. Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss, and Phillip Cole (London: Routledge, 2017), 230.

86. Jacqueline Bhabha, "From Citizen to Migrant: The Scope of Child Statelessness in the Twenty-First Century," in *Children Without a State: A Global Human Rights Challenge*, ed. Jacqueline Bhabha (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 3.

generation: “if not properly addressed, [the continuation of statelessness] undermines the project of liberal political theory itself.”<sup>87</sup> For Uyghurs, then, it seems clear that countries which do not adhere to the *jus soli* doctrine should be responsible for granting citizenship to the children of Uyghur asylum-seekers, as an effective citizenship is a crucial means of ensuring that these children are not marginalized throughout their lives and can exercise their full scope of rights as adults. Doing otherwise would constitute, as Patti Tamara Lenard argues, no less than a violation of their right to an open future.<sup>88</sup>

Acting in the best interest of the child so as to ensure that they have access to special care and assistance nonetheless requires more than simple access to citizenship. It also requires that efforts be made to prevent children from being separated from their parents whenever possible. As Lenard explains, being with family is essential to a child’s development: not only are parents “often the best providers of care to their children, even in challenging circumstances,” but “children suffer when they are not with their parents, even in cases where parents are not able to provide the best and widest range of opportunities for their children.”<sup>89</sup>

In the context of Turkey, however, Uyghur parents (particularly those who are stateless) appear to be at risk of being deported or detained. Not only is the signing of Turkey’s extradition treaty with China alarming, but China’s consistent refusal to renew the passports of Uyghurs living in Turkey places them in a particularly vulnerable situation. Without valid passports, Uyghurs will lose the (already limited) privileges attached to their residence permits. Moreover, they have little ability to claim asylum given that Turkey does not admit refugees from outside Europe. Supposing that children have a legitimate claim to citizenship, deporting Uyghur parents without their children would violate the children’s right to family unity and prevent them from being with those who can provide them the best care. Conversely, not granting any Uyghurs—including children—citizenship and deporting them all to China because of their irregular statuses, would likely result in their separation abroad under much worse conditions.<sup>90</sup>

Another reason why the problem of stateless children is so pressing relates to the fact that, as Bhabha puts it, “[c]hildren rely on the state for surrogate protection when the family—their primary source of protection—fails them.”<sup>91</sup> Children need to be taken care of by responsible adults to ensure their development and well-being. However, without a legitimate claim to the services offered by the state, “children [are rendered] liable to be treated as delinquents who are outside the regulatory framework of the juvenile justice system.”<sup>92</sup> Thus, having a legal status is essential, particularly for children who are unaccompanied or have been separated from their parents, as is the case for approximately 1000 Uyghur children in Turkey.

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87. Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss and Phillip Cole, “Introduction: Providing a Framework for Understanding Statelessness,” in *Understanding Statelessness*, ed. Tendayi Bloom, Katherine Tonkiss, and Phillip Cole (London: Routledge, 2017), 5.

88. Lenard, “The Right to Family.”

89. Lenard, “The Right to Family,” 236.

90. In the *Weaponized Passports* report, the UHRP precisely urges states to make a firm commitment not to deport Uyghurs in the likely event that they are not able to renew their identity documents. See UHRP, *Weaponized Passports*, 25.

91. Bhabha, “From Citizen to Migrant,” 14.

92. Bhabha, “From Citizen to Migrant,” 17.

### Responding to the Crisis through Uyghur-Led Educational Initiatives

The specific situation of Uyghurs in Turkey illustrates both how unaccompanied irregular migrant children depend on the special care of adults to ensure their well-being and safeguard their right to an open future, and how a community may, when needed, make incredible efforts to develop structures that protect the best interests of its youngest members in keeping with the collective interests of the community. Indeed, in the Turkish context, Uyghur-led educational initiatives or “non-formal schools,” as Rebecca Clothey calls them,<sup>93</sup> have played a crucial role in ensuring surrogate protection for separated children.

For Habibullah Kuseni, the principal of the Oku Uygur Bilig Yurdu school in Istanbul, it became a priority to transform his school into what he calls an “orphanage” around 2016, when he started to realize that some Uyghur children were unaccompanied. This notably implied filing paperwork to obtain a permit to function as an official orphanage, but also seeking additional funding, furniture, and personnel to oversee the facilities where children were to be hosted. Kuseni recounts how, back in 2016–2017, he personally tracked down Uyghur minors who were reported to be living unaccompanied—sometimes, as he claims, in a state of homelessness—to invite them to stay at the school.<sup>94</sup>

Besides ensuring that separated Uyghur children’s basic needs are taken care of, this Uyghur school became a core institution for the promotion of the rights and best interests of Uyghur children. To begin with, the school handles the cases of separated children who are at risk of becoming stateless by filing the necessary documents to allow them to obtain a residence permit or, if possible, a new citizenship. Children who suffer from post-traumatic syndrome and/or loss are also treated, and the school tries to help them establish a new sense of community and family with other children in a similar situation and/or Uyghur adults who are likely to understand them.<sup>95</sup> The schools also ensure that Uyghur children successfully pursue their education by offering complimentary courses in various topics such as English, mathematics, science, and geography.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, since the school cares for children after school hours, it provides relief to single parents who must work in the evening or on the weekend, thus contributing to reducing unemployment and precarity among Uyghur families.<sup>97</sup>

The fact that the Oku Uygur Bilig Yurdu school (like other Uyghur schools<sup>98</sup>) quickly became a main gathering point of migrant Uyghur children is not accidental. One thing that stood out from the interview data was the concern diasporic Uyghurs had with ensuring that Uyghur children maintain their sense of belonging to the Uyghur community, which concomitantly implies the belief that unaccompanied Uyghur children must not be raised outside of the Uyghur community. Given this concern, the Oku Bilig Yurdu school also works to ensure that Uyghur children, and especially Uyghur “orphans,” do not grow up estranged from their native community. In fact, the participants interviewed for this research seemed to believe that Uyghur schools represent the best surrogate provider for unaccompanied Uyghur children, as

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93. Clothey explains that these schools are non-formal in the sense that they do not lead to a diploma; however, they function like a school. See “Education and the Politics of Cultural Survival,” 2.

94. Interview December 6, 2020.

95. Bouscaren, “In Turkey, A Boarding School Cares For Uighur Children Separated From Their Parents”; Maaz İbrahimoglu, “Parentless Students of Istanbul’s Uighur Dormitory Attest to Chinese Oppression,” *Ahval*, December 24, 2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-uighurs/parentless-students-istanbuls-uighur-dormitory-attest-chinese-oppression/>; Ingram, “Miracle in Istanbul”; Kakissis, “Somewhere Like Home”; Simina Mistreanu, “The Capital of Xinjiang Is Now in Turkey,” *Foreign Policy*, September 30, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/30/the-capital-of-xinjiang-is-now-in-turkey/>.

96. Clothey, “Education and the Politics of Cultural Survival.”

97. McKernan, “I Miss My Homeland.”

98 See for instance Clothey, “Education and the Politics of Cultural Survival.”



it was best equipped to address the particular needs of Uyghur children as well as the concerns related to them “losing” their Uyghur identity by being placed in the care of the Turkish state.

The transmission of Uyghur culture to the next generation emerged as a particularly central concern when the topic of unaccompanied children was brought up, a concern which underlined much of the discussion surrounding the upbringing of children in the diaspora. In the current context of crisis and repression in the Uyghur homeland, the responsibility of preserving the Uyghur identity seems to have been accepted as a task belonging to members of the community living in the diaspora. In her study of the maintenance of language and culture among Uyghurs in Turkey, Clothey observes that Uyghur schools in Turkey grew and multiplied around the time where the measures against Uyghurs living in China became increasingly repressive of the Uyghur culture.<sup>99</sup> While the Oku Uygur Bilig Yurdu school has played a key role in promoting the best interests of unaccompanied Uyghur children in Turkey, its primary purpose, like other Uyghur schools, is the safeguarding of the Uyghurs’ distinctive culture and the bolstering of children’s knowledge of the Uyghur language and history. In Turkey, Uyghur children can study Uyghur history and literature through books that are banned in China. In this sense, Clothey argues that these schools “serve as sites where cultural identities are passed on with embedded ideologies as *counternarratives* to the dominant discourse in the country of origin or the host country.”<sup>100</sup> By ensuring that Uyghur culture is thriving in the diaspora, and, moreover, by ensuring that Uyghur children—especially unaccompanied children—have an open future despite being placed in a difficult situation, these institutions can be viewed a means of resistance to the CCP’s attempts to erase Uyghur culture. Moreover, these schools may contribute to new and emerging Uyghur initiatives across the diaspora, such as the publication of Uyghur language children’s books and the growth of Uyghur bookstores,<sup>101</sup> thus enhancing the general well-being and flourishing of the community.

The role that Uyghur schools have played in addressing the crisis in the Uyghur homeland reminds us that the lived experience of resettlement does not stop at securing new citizenship, but is intertwined in a set of collective concerns that orient Uyghur migrants’ projects and priorities in the diaspora. In the case of Turkey, these priorities have revolved around ensuring that the youngest generation of Uyghurs have access to an open future all while continuing to carry their distinctive Uyghur identity.

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99. Clothey, “Education and the Politics of Cultural Survival,” 6.

100. Clothey, “Education and the Politics of Cultural Survival,” 4.

101. Mistreanu, “The Capital of Xinjiang Is Now in Turkey.”

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