

## Turkish Opposition Leader Says Extradition Treaty With China Should Hinge on Xinjiang Probe

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Turkish opposition leader Selçuk Özdağ has called on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to withdraw an extradition treaty with China, saying ratification should not proceed until Beijing allows independent monitors to probe reports of human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

China's National People's Congress ratified a treaty with Turkey last week allowing for the forcible deportation of ethnic Uyghurs fleeing persecution by authorities in the XUAR, with opposition lawmakers in Turkey vowing to block ratification in their own parliament.

Beijing has described the treaty signed in 2017 as a measure to defeat Islamic terrorism in the XUAR, where up to 1.8 million Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minority groups accused of religious extremism are believed to have been held in a vast network of internment camps since April of that year.

Turkey is home to more than 50,000 of the world's nearly 12 million Uyghurs, who historically have viewed a fellow Turkic nation as a refuge and advocate for their religious and cultural rights.

On Tuesday, Selçuk Özdağ, vice chairman of Turkey's Future Party, met with Uyghurs protesting on behalf of missing or detained family members in front of the Chinese consulate in Istanbul and called on Erdoğan—head of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)—and Turkish lawmakers to refrain from ratifying the treaty until Beijing allows foreign investigations of the situation in the XUAR.

He said that doing so without an agreement from Beijing would be a “disgrace” to the Uyghur community.

“China must open its doors to all NGOs, law-enforcement agencies, politicians, and journalists around the world,” he said.

“If what’s happening in East Turkestan is a lie, we want to see it with our own eyes, hear it with our own ears, and know it in our own hearts,” he added, using the name preferred by Uyghurs for their homeland.

Chinese officials have said the camps in the XUAR are centers for “vocational training,” but reporting by RFA’s Uyghur Service and other media outlets shows that detainees are mostly held against their will in cramped and unsanitary conditions, where they are forced to endure inhumane treatment and political indoctrination.

Amid growing international scrutiny of the extralegal penal system, reports suggest that Uyghurs are being transferred from internment camps to forced labor situations.

“Until China opens its doors, the Republic of Turkey should not [ratify] an extradition agreement with China,” Özdağ said. “If they sign it, they will have committed a betrayal.”

“In my role as a leader of the Future Party, I, along with leaders from parties across the whole of parliament, want to go and see the mosques of East Turkestan, to see whether there are camps. Let us take the names of the missing, one by one, so that the Turkish Republic might investigate them.”

Attempts by RFA to contact the Chinese consulate in Istanbul went unanswered Tuesday.

The statement by Özdağ, thought to be the first Turkish politician to have visited the Uyghur-led protests held at the Chinese consulate since the extradition treaty was signed on Dec. 21, represents the strongest challenge yet to the Erdoğan government over the agreement.

In particular, Özdağ called on Erdoğan and his ally Nationalist Movement (MHP) Party leader Devlet Bahçeli to break with Doğu Perinçek, the leader of the radical left-wing Vatan Party (Homeland Party), who is known in Turkey for his pro-China support.

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated last week that he would not extradite Uyghurs to China, however his comments have done little to comfort to members of the ethnic group living in Turkey in exile, who say they are concerned by ambiguities in the terms of the agreement. The treaty was submitted to the Turkish Parliament for approval by Erdoğan last year and is still awaiting ratification.

### **Concerns well-placed**

Mustafa Akyol, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington who monitors Turkish politics, told RFA that the concerns of Uyghur refugees in Turkey are well-placed.

“In China’s view, all who have criticized the government or violated its restrictions on religion and ethnicity are terrorists,” he said. “We cannot accept such an interpretation of terrorism.”

“But the terrifying part of the issue is that Turkey’s own interpretation of terrorism is as ambiguous as this one, meaning there’s a commonality between them. This worries me, because Turkey also has a political mentality in which it is easy to label people as terrorists.”

Akyol stressed that there are a number of opposition parties and other groups across Turkish society, including Islamic groups, who are putting pressure on the government of Turkey not to ratify the treaty. But he noted that, ultimately, the decision rests with Erdoğan.

“My hope is that the government—or in reality, to put it more correctly, Erdoğan, because the government and parliament don’t have much of a role left to play in Turkey—is forced to withdraw from the treaty as a result of pressure from public opinion,” he said.

“If Erdoğan takes the public pressure to heart and signals that he has decided not to ratify the treaty signed with China, the AKP in parliament and the MHP will act accordingly, and the treaty will not be put on the agenda. And thus, the Uyghurs in Turkey would be able to breathe a bit easier.”

Akyol noted that a decade ago, Erdoğan accused China of trying to wipe out the Uyghurs, but that his political opinions were different at the time and he was on a path toward making Turkey a member of the European Union. Now, however, the Turkish government appears to be taking great pains to avoid angering China.

“The commonality between Erdoğan’s absolute rule and the 2016 military coup is that Turkey has latched onto a mindset in which the West is the enemy and countries like Russia and China are allies,” he said.

### **Stronger relations**

Analysts have noted that the relationship between Turkey and China is increasingly growing stronger, with Erdoğan recently pledging security cooperation with Beijing and saying that residents of the XUAR live happy and prosperous lives under Beijing’s rule, according to reports in Chinese state media.

The Turkish government had long refused to deport Uyghurs back to China, but that changed in June 2019—two months after the extradition treaty was submitted to the parliament—when Turkey sent several Uyghurs home via Tajikistan, including a woman named Zinnetgul Tursun along with her two toddler daughters.

A month later, Tursun’s sister, who lives in exile in Saudi Arabia, learned from her mother in the XUAR that Tursun had “disappeared” and that her family had no information about what had happened to her, and was warned by her mother to end all further communication.

Last week, the Munich-based World Uyghur Congress exile group called on Turkey to refrain from ratifying the extradition treaty, which it said “is likely to become another instrument of

persecution for China, aiding the Chinese government in its coordinated efforts to forcibly return Uyghurs living abroad.”