

D.C.'s Outpost of Uyghur Cuisine Serves as Reminder to Genocide Abroad

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For many who walk through the doors of Dolan Uyghur in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of Washington, D.C., the restaurant is a learning experience — through food on the tables, art on the walls, and conversations with the owner about escaping from China — about a culture and a people in the midst of persecution. For others, the restaurant is a place to feel at home again, when home in Xinjiang is out of reach.

For those who haven't heard of Uyghur cuisine before, a glimpse of the three-year-old restaurant's curly green signs should inspire a search of "Uyghur" online. There, people will find article upon article about the mass internment, forced labor, involuntary sterilization and death threatening 11 million people — a Turkic Muslim minority group — in the Xinjiang region of northwest China.

According to the U.S. Department of State, the Chinese government has abused more than 1 million Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minority groups through "far-reaching and arbitrary detention and forced labor" since 2017.

This effort to wipe Uyghur culture from the earth is what Hamid Kerim, the owner of this small Washington restaurant, is trying to prevent.

In a black suit and thick accent, Kerim shifted between the Uyghur language (which has its roots in Turkish) and the English he's working to improve.

"Genocide killing Uyghurs' culture, history, medicine, everything," said Kerim, gesturing to the restaurant's colorful portraits of dancing people; to the little wooden instruments hanging from the walls; to the air filled with scents of cumin and pepper from the kitchen.

"All the world will wake up [and ask], where's Uyghur? That time, Uyghur [will be] finished," said Kerim.

He poured a cup of hot Uyghur tea, amber liquid swirling with deep-orange flower petals and cardamom pods. A server carefully placed a plate of *goshnan* — fried pie with spiced beef, lamb and onions — on the table.

Though Dolan Uyghur is known for its food, Kerim has filled the space with purpose. In it, he pays homage to the region he fled from and can't return to.

In 1997, when Kerim was 16 years old, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) imprisoned his older brother, Abdulxukur, for demonstrating against China's ongoing human rights abuses on Uyghurs — an act of protest, Kerim said, that is "a big felony."

Fifteen years later, Abdulxukur was released from prison, said Kerim. Abdulxukur reunited with his family. He got to know his daughter and son, who had spent most of their lives without him. Abdulxukur and his wife, Hun, had another baby boy.

But in 2017, as the CCP clamped down again on Uyghurs, Abdulxukur was taken back to jail. Hun was imprisoned, too. Kerim said Hun's only crimes were being Uyghur and marrying Abdulxukur, who protested for Uyghur rights back in 1997.

With both parents taken from them, the three children moved in with Kerim's mother. Later that year, a friend in the police force told Kerim that his name was "on a list," and that Kerim should leave the country soon. Kerim said he never participated in protests against the CCP while living in China, but that the CCP was after all Uyghurs at that time.

Through his police friend, Kerim got hold of a passport — which he said is extremely difficult for Uyghurs to get in China — and fled to the United States. He settled in Chantilly, Virginia, with his wife and two children. In new calmness, they welcomed a third child.

Soon after, Kerim got to work as the owner of Dolan Uyghur. That's where he met Mary Johns: the founder of **Open Kitchen D.C.**, which connects curious locals with immigrant restaurants in Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C.

In February 2020, Kerim and Johns hosted their first event at Dolan Uyghur, where they celebrated Uyghur culture and connected more people to it. A musician played traditional Uyghur songs, the chef showed attendees how to pull handmade Uyghur noodles and Kerim gave a speech about his story of fleeing Xinjiang.

More than 25 people attended the event, said Johns. The attendees told their friends, who then told their friends, about a culture and cuisine they didn't know about before.

In this simple way, they helped Kerim move his mission forward: To get Americans knowing and caring enough about Uyghurs to push for an end to the crisis in China.

Kerim and Johns started planning monthly events at Dolan Uyghur, but the coronavirus pandemic also ramped up around that time. Kerim's plans to host more large gatherings at the restaurant are on hold until after the virus subsides.

But throughout the pandemic, Johns helped Kerim coordinate the preparation and delivery of hundreds of Uyghur-style meals to doctors and nurses at local hospitals.

"He's also spoken to my oldest daughter's class and shared his story there through a translator," said Johns.

Through these various channels, Kerim spreads awareness of what's happening to Uyghurs. He tells his story over and over and over again, because he wants the abuse in China to end.

Kerim's brother and sister-in-law are still imprisoned. Their three kids are still with Kerim's mother.

Kerim desperately wants to speak to his mother and remaining family in Xinjiang, without fear of the CCP tracking their phone conversations, finding out that he's moved to America, and retaliating by imprisoning more members of his family.

On a more basic level, Kerim wants to be able to tell his mother and nephews and nieces about his life, and to ask candidly about theirs.

On China's independence day, Oct. 1, Kerim joined other Uyghurs in the area to protest China's human rights abuses on Uyghurs. They want to know, why have their friends and family been taken by the CCP? Where are their loved ones? Are they even alive?

Kerim hopes that President-elect Joe Biden, who has referred to China's treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang as "genocide," will pressure China to stop torturing and killing Uyghurs.

Georgetown University professor James Millward, who teaches Chinese, Central Asian and world history, authored a **September report** for the Brookings Institution about China's systemic oppression of Uyghurs. Millward also looks to the incoming Biden administration for ways to curb the human rights crisis in Xinjiang.

"(Biden's) new Secretary of State pick is all about...returning to working with allies and international organizations," said Millward.

This would be a change from the Trump administration's 2017 withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and 2018 withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council.

"The U.S. needs to be back there and take the lead simply because we're big enough to stand up to Chinese bullying," said Millward.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of a **recent article** about how the U.S. should respond to China's oppression of Uyghurs, weighed in on America's current approach toward China and Uyghurs.

"(The) policy is not a sophisticated, thoughtful approach about the Uyghurs, but rather, the Uyghurs are an add-on to a broader policy of hostility towards China," said Bandow.

Bandow doesn't think imposing broad economic sanctions is effective in curbing China's human rights abuses.

He **argued** that more effective approaches would involve working with other nations, particularly with Muslim-majority countries, to speak out; internationally prohibiting goods that are thought to be produced by coerced Uyghur workers; and organizing to protest and embarrass China and its enablers.

Additionally, **Millward wrote** that America should more clearly demand the closure of Chinese internment camps, accelerate asylum for Uyghurs living in the United States and publicly report on Chinese supply chains to increase corporate due diligence.

However, major American companies like Nike, Coca-Cola and Apple **are lobbying** against the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, a bill that would ban imported goods made with forced labor in Xinjiang.

Kerim recognizes the stickiness of this situation due to the global business interests at play.

"Walmart, Adidas, a lot of companies know [about the]...very cheap labor from these camps, Uyghurs, and continue [to] make business," said Kerim. "God gives American people this very big test...if you cannot pass this test, you [will be] shame on history."

In January, Kerim plans to open a second location of Dolan Uyghur near his home in Chantilly, Virginia. There, Kerim will continue spreading awareness and pushing for an end to the trauma he and his people have had to face.

He thanks America for the recognition it has given to the Uyghur crisis so far.

“But this is not enough,” said Kerim. “Like 1945, Hitler...it [has] come back again for 2020.”