

**CHINA'S MASS DETENTIONS**

**AND INCARCERATION OF**

**UYGHUR MUSLIMS**

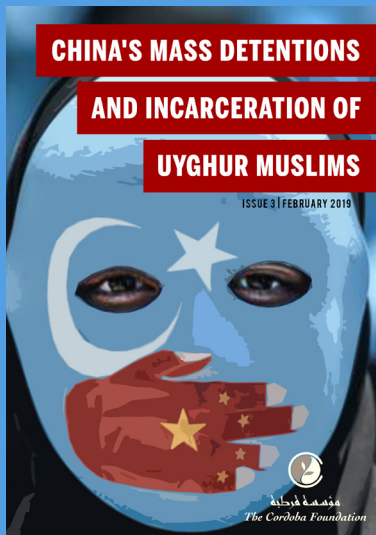
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# CHINA'S MASS DETENTIONS AND INCARCERATION OF UYGHUR MUSLIMS

Dr Rachel Harris\*

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China is home to some 12 million indigenous Turkic speaking Muslims, primarily Uyghurs but also smaller numbers of Kazakhs and others. It is now one of the most heavily policed areas in the world. Inhabitants are controlled and monitored to an extraordinary degree and detained in extraordinary numbers. These extreme policies are justified by the claim that China is fighting Islamic radicalisation and extremism.

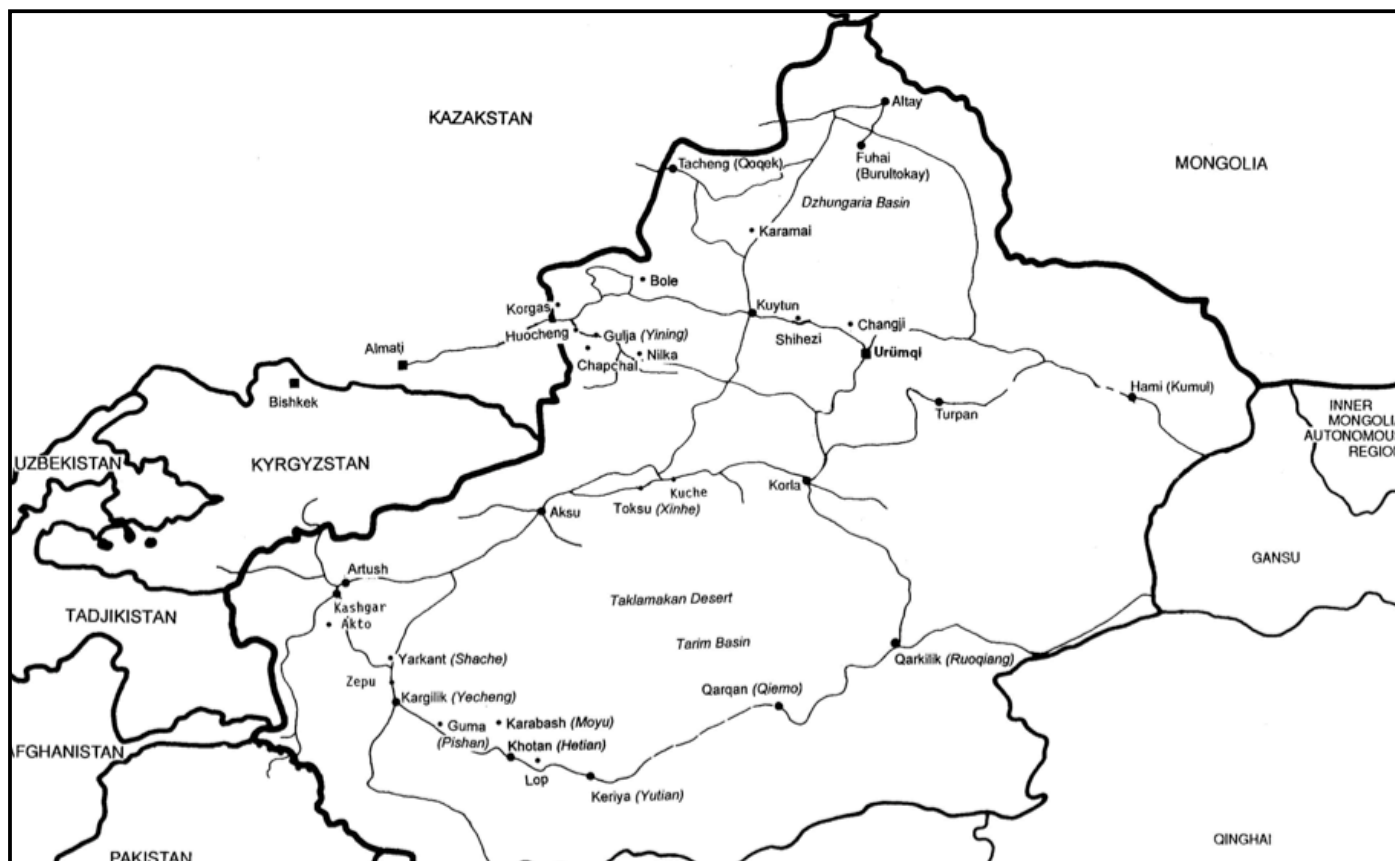
## Fighting Uyghur “separatism” and perceived threat from Islamic revival

Throughout the 1990s China pursued a series of “strike hard” campaigns against what it then called Uyghur “separatism”. “Separatist

incidents” at this time took in a wide range of activities from instances of local unrest to attempts to promote Uyghur autonomy, or even promote Uyghur cultural identity. Soon after the September 11 attacks on the United States, China began to explain incidences of unrest or random violence in Xinjiang, which previously were termed “separatism,” as premeditated terrorist attacks spurred by religious extremism. To what degree can these government claims be justified?

Since the 1980s, we have seen a rise in Islamic religiosity and piety in Xinjiang (Smith Finley 2013; Harris 2015), very similar in form, and closely related to the revival elsewhere in Central Asia, and more broadly a part of the global Islamic revival. It primarily took the form of a steady rise in religious practice and public expression: building new community mosques, growing numbers of people adopting daily prayer, fasting and forms of Islamic dress, and many debates about how to be a good Muslim.

China’s increasingly severe policies towards Islam after 2001 produced a downward spiral



Map of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, northwest China

of repression, which provoked violent incidents, which resulted in further repression. By 2014 this cycle of violence had escalated to the point that some Uyghur-initiated acts of violence began looking increasingly like planned terrorist attacks. 2014 saw the killing of thirty-three people with knives by a band of masked Uyghurs in a train station in Kunming, and the bombing of the Urumqi station that killed forty-three. The Chinese government responded by declaring a 'Peoples War on Terror' (Roberts 2018).



**An entry in a "peasant art competition" illustrating Xi Jinping's 2014 call for the Uyghur masses to slaughter terrorists and extremists like vermin.**

In my view, it is China's concerns about this broad based Islamic revival that have motivated the current heavy securitization of the region. Its so-called anti-terror policies are not targeted at small groups potentially vulnerable to extremism, but at all forms of Muslim religious expression. The 'People's War on Terror' is directly linked to Xi Jinping's wider moves to establish his personal authority, and to demonstrate absolute control over this key strategic region, in order to ensure the success of the flagship 'Belt and Road Initiative' (Clarke 2017).<sup>1</sup>

### **New counter-terrorism legislation**

New counter-terrorism legislation introduced in 2015 defined "terrorism" in a way that criminalised virtually any Uyghur expression of dissent or religiosity as signs of religious extremism and terrorism. It introduced extensive powers of surveillance and

copyright, especially regarding Internet and social media communications. It curtailed Uyghur mobility; Uyghurs were required to apply for a 'convenience card' if they wished to leave their hometown. It criminalised the wearing of veils and growing of beards, along with other everyday religious practices, including daily prayer, fasting, and halal eating practices.



**Propaganda mural: "Discriminating against those who do not fast by not eating the food they prepare is a form of religious extremism." (Living Otherwise)<sup>2</sup>**

In 2016 Chen Quanguo – formerly Party Secretary in Tibet – was appointed as Party Secretary in Xinjiang. Following his arrival we saw an extraordinary rise in security measures, and a clear policy of racial profiling of Uyghurs. During this period we have seen the expansion of the "anti-extremism campaign" to include not just religious people, but many prominent writers, artists and academics who were either too active in promoting Uyghur culture, or had too many foreign connections.

Under Chen, Uyghurs have been effectively quarantined from the outside world – people have had their passports confiscated, and by 2017, even receiving a phone call from a family member living outside China has become an offence punishable by detention in a re-education camp. Chen introduced "grid-style social management" involving extraordinarily high levels of policing, and many new recruits. Thousands of new "convenience police stations" were rolled out on Xinjiang's streets to play a critical role in the surveillance.

There are now numerous checkpoints on the roads, at train and bus stations, and inside towns and cities. These checkpoints come



**“Grid-style social management”: a new “convenience” police station**

complete with metal detectors and facial recognition or iris scan machines. We know from independent observers that only Uyghurs are required to pass through these scanners; Han Chinese citizens pass through a separate gate. In some areas cars must be equipped with GPS trackers. Kitchen knives are etched with serial numbers that are linked to the ID number of the purchaser. Human Rights Watch<sup>3</sup> has reported on the development of a biological database to assist in tracking Uyghurs, and on the compulsory collection of DNA samples.



**Uyghurs queue at a checkpoint in Khotan beneath a giant TV image of Xi Jinping**

**Low-tech surveillance**

There is also plenty of low-tech surveillance. Local people are asked to monitor and report on each other, and must participate in ideological education and criticism meetings. The “becoming family” policy has brought surveillance right into the home, with a programme of home stays<sup>4</sup> with Uyghur families by Han “relatives” who are expected to

report on signs of “extremism”.

Locals are mobilised in counter-terrorism exercises, which involve marching around the streets with big sticks. There are rewards for information: five million RMB for information on actual planned terrorist attacks, 2000 RMB for reporting face coverings or beards. Over 10,000 teams of visiting officials descended on Uyghur rural households in 2017. This was part of the “Becoming Family” policy. Han “relatives” stayed with Uyghur families and were required to report on “extremist” behaviour by their hosts, such as not drinking alcohol, fasting during Ramadan, and possessing “undesirable” items like Qur’ans.



**A counter terrorism drill in a southern town in Xinjiang**

As if they were not sufficiently exhausted by all these security measures, Uyghurs are regularly mobilised to participate in nationalist mass activities to counter extremism, such as celebrations of Chinese culture, singing revolutionary songs and dancing.



**Singing Red Songs to counter religious extremism**

## The “Re-education” Camps and Incarceration

The consequence of non-compliance in these activities is incarceration in the network of detention camps or “re-education centres” that have sprung up around the region. While estimates of the numbers of people detained is speculative, the available evidence suggests that more than 10% of Xinjiang’s Muslim minority population – Uyghur, Kazakhs and others – a total of over one million people, have been interned in political re-education facilities.

China has only recently acknowledged<sup>5</sup> the existence of these camps under heavy pressure from Western media. In response to questions raised by a UN committee in August 2018, it issued rebuttals concerning the scope and aims of the camps. However there is mounting, incontrovertible evidence concerning the numbers of people being detained in the camps, and the methods of re-education being used in them.

Adrian Zenz<sup>6</sup> has unearthed a substantial body of government sources showing a huge spike in government procurement of construction contracts in spring, 2017, valued at around RMB 680 million (over £78 million). These contracts indicate both the construction of new re-education facilities as well as upgrades and enlargements of existing facilities, which range in size between 10,000 and 82,000sqm. Many bids mandate the installation of comprehensive security features including barbed wire fences, reinforced security doors and windows, surveillance systems, watchtowers, and guardrooms.

### “Re-education” methods







From interviews with the few people who have been released from these camps, and people employed as instructors in the camps, we know that detainees wake before dawn, sing the Chinese national anthem, and raise the Chinese flag. Instructors lecture them about the dangers of Islam, and internees are tested and punished if they fail to provide the correct answers.

Forced repetition and self-criticism are central to the re-education program. Before meals, inmates chant, “Thank the Party! Thank the Motherland! Thank President Xi,” and sing revolutionary songs such as “Without the Communist Party, there is no New China.” They are required to present self-criticism, and submit to criticism by their fellows. They must apologise repeatedly for wearing long clothes in Muslim style, praying, teaching the Qur’an to their children. Those who refuse to do so are punished with solitary confinement, beatings and food deprivation.

Testimonies hint at the psychological trauma inflicted on detainees. Reports also attest to the trauma suffered by the wider Uyghur population, both within Xinjiang and in the diaspora. We know that Uyghurs within Xinjiang are struggling to maintain daily life with over 10% of the workforce in detention. Many children have been sent to state orphanages because both their parents have been detained. Uyghurs living outside Xinjiang are suffering from crippling anxiety and guilt: they risk detention for their relatives if they try to contact them, and they fear worse consequences for their detained relatives if they speak out.

## Prominent figures detained

	Erfan Hezim, <sup>7</sup> professional football player, in 2017.
	Muhammad Salih Hajim, <sup>8</sup> prominent religious scholar 82 years old, died in custody, January 2018.
	Tashpolat Teyip, <sup>9</sup> Xinjiang University President, detained in 2017, accused as a “two-faced” official, insufficiently loyal to the state.

	Professor Rahile Dawut, <sup>10</sup> Xinjiang University Professor, detained in 2017, possibly in connection with her ethnographic research on Uyghur religious culture.
	Abduqadir Jaleddin, <sup>11</sup> Uyghur writer and Xinjiang Normal University Professor, detained in January 2018.
	Elenur Eqilahun, <sup>12</sup> detained in 2017, possibly for receiving calls from her daughter who is studying abroad.
	Ablajan Ayup, <sup>13</sup> Pop star, detained in February 2018, possibly for singing about Uyghur language education.
	Halmurat Ghopur, <sup>14</sup> Vice Provost of Xinjiang Medical Institute, detained in 2017 for exhibiting “nationalistic tendencies.”
	Ilham Tohti, <sup>15</sup> Professor at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing, sentenced to life imprisonment.

This short list of prominent Uyghur intellectuals, artists, and athletes who we know have been detained is only the tip of the iceberg, but it demonstrates that the scope of the campaign has gone well beyond the religious sphere. Current policies seek to quarantine Uyghurs from any foreign contacts, targeting individuals who have promoted Uyghur language or culture and people who resist or are insufficiently enthusiastic about the campaign. It suggests that the anti-“terror” campaign is being used as part of a wider set of policies, including the so-called “bilingual education” policy, which has banned the use of Uyghur language in schools and higher education. These policies are designed to break down ethnic identity and affiliation, and absorb minority nationalities into the wider Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu*).

**What do government sources mean by “extremism” and “terrorism”?**

Beginning in the 1980s, Xinjiang, just like other parts of China and Central Asia, experienced a broad-based Islamic revival expressed through projects such as community mosque building, the widespread adoption of daily prayer, fasting, forms of Islamic dress, and many debates about how to live a good Muslim life in 21<sup>st</sup> century China. As part of my research project, *Sounding Islam in China*<sup>17</sup> (2014-17) I spent time in rural southern Xinjiang and observed the rise of these new sensibilities among Uyghur villagers, and the ways those new styles of Islam intersected with local traditions.

China views these developments as a threat to its stability, development projects, and expanding influence through the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative. Far from targeting religious extremism, government campaigns criminalise the everyday practice of Islam. Government sources identify “75 types of behaviour that show religious extremism”. They range from calling for jihad to praying, eating halal, fasting, growing a beard, giving up smoking and drinking, possessing a Qur’an, or listening to religious media.



Pop Video by Ablajan Ayup, “Dear Teacher” (Soyumlik Muellim)<sup>16</sup>



Since 2001, China has consistently explained incidences of local unrest or violence in Xinjiang as premeditated terrorist attacks. We know of several violent incidents from 2013-14 which did involve the deliberate targeting of Han Chinese civilians. However, many more incidents began as peaceful demonstrations which were met by police violence and were subsequently portrayed as terrorist attacks. Increasingly, non-violent expressions of resistance and the expression of everyday religious faith are described as terrorism.<sup>18</sup>

### **Eradicating ideological viruses**

Government documents<sup>19</sup> for internal consumption explain that people are detained because they have been infected by an “ideological illness” and that forced repetition and self-criticism are central to the “cure”. Accounts by former detainees<sup>20</sup> detail a strict regime of marching, singing revolutionary songs, lectures on the dangers of Islam, and quizzes on the thought of Xi Jinping. Detainees must apologise repeatedly for “blindly following” Islam or Uyghur nationalism, and they must criticise their fellow inmates. Those who refuse or fail the tests are punished with solitary confinement, beatings and food deprivation.

Several of my Uyghur colleagues and friends, including my former research collaborators,<sup>21</sup> have been indefinitely detained without charge. It is harder to glean information from rural areas, but what information I have suggests that many of my former hosts have been detained, and others are struggling to maintain their families and livelihoods while their husbands or mothers have “gone to study.”

### **Ethnic blending**

Although government sources continue to claim that they are countering extremism, the situation has moved far beyond the sphere of religion and must now be read as a broad assault on Uyghur culture and identity. The thinking behind these policies has been most clearly expressed by Hu Lianhe, who argues that China must abandon its current nationalities policies

and promote the blending together of all ethnic groups into a single “state-race”.<sup>22</sup>

We can see this approach being applied in several ways: through experiments with newly established “Unity Villages”, within which locals and Han migrants are given cash incentives to start interethnic families; through to the detention of numerous Uyghur cultural leaders, including academics, writers and musicians; and the emphasis on separating Uyghur children from parents deemed ideologically “unsafe” and raising them in state orphanages.<sup>23</sup>

### **The hollowing out of Uyghur culture**

At the UN hearing, a Uyghur official, echoing a 1950s song, said, “Xinjiang is a nice place. I’d like to say, welcome to Xinjiang.” The government promotes Xinjiang as a safe and welcoming destination for tourism, but the ethnic culture served up to tourists is a version that has been hollowed out. We can see this most clearly in the old town<sup>24</sup> of Kashgar, which has been bulldozed and rebuilt to facilitate the gaze of Chinese and foreign tourists. Their safety is ensured by the omnipresent security apparatus, and their harmonious experience is grounded by copious amounts of singing and dancing.

### **Conclusion**

The Turkic-speaking Muslim minority peoples are now collectively regarded as a threat to China’s national security. As one official from Kashgar reportedly<sup>25</sup> said at a public meeting, “you can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one – you need to spray chemicals to kill them all; re-educating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops... that is why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people.”

What might our long-term responses to this crisis involve? Many are now voicing deep concern about the long-term impact of these socially and economically devastating policies. Many have drawn parallels with China’s Cultural Revolution, but the current policies are much

more tightly controlled, and they specifically target minority identity and culture. In this sense, they more directly recall the actions of coloniser-settler regimes in Australia and the Americas, whose territorial demands and “civilising mission” destroyed indigenous communities and cultures.

It is striking to observe these parallels at a time when Western governments are finally issuing apologies and making reparations to indigenous communities, and when vibrant revival movements are underway. As an academic specialising in Uyghur expressive culture, I am now increasingly concerned about the loss of Uyghur cultural traditions. We urgently need to protect Uyghur culture and traditions from deliberate and systematic erosion. At the very least create accessible archives, and find ways to sustain traditions in the diaspora in forms that are not hollowed out, which retain meaning and relevance for local communities.



\*Dr Rachel Harris is a Reader in Ethnomusicology at SOAS, University of London where she specialises on China and Central Asia with a special focus on the Uyghurs. She has conducted fieldwork in Xinjiang, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for over 20 years. Harris is currently the principal investigator on a new *research project*<sup>26</sup> on Uyghur heritage in the diaspora, supported by the British Academy Sustainable Development Fund. Her forthcoming book, *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam*, traces the rise and violent fall of the Islamic revival in Xinjiang.

## Endnotes

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## Resources

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- <http://www.newser.com/story/263158/scholars-vanishing-points-to-1m-held-in-secret-camps.html>
- <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?p=33854> (January 2018 statement by the World Uyghur Congress including a list of detained academics)
- <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur> (includes detailed reports on individuals detained)

# China's brute crackdown and mass incarceration of

# UYGHUR MUSLIMS

Uyghur Muslims have been persecuted for 70 years by the Chinese government since the occupation of East Turkistan (Xinjiang). Today, hundreds of thousands are being interned in camps, forced to denounce their faith, and undergo "re-education" programmes. Subjected to torture, physical extermination, cultural assimilation and social re-engineering, this is Cultural Genocide!



Wed 13 Feb 2019 • 6pm–8:45pm

London Muslim Centre, 46 London Muslim Centre, London E1 1JQ

## SPEAKERS:

**Rodney Dixon QC** ▶ International human rights lawyer from Temple Garden Chambers, and Associated Independent Counsel at Stoke White. His expertise includes foreign relations, inter-State disputes, the armed forces, international prosecutions & defence, universal jurisdiction, and extradition.



**Emily Thornberry MP** – tbc ▶ MP for Islington South and Finsbury, and the Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.



**Alistair Carmichael** – tbc ▶ MP for Orkney and Shetland; tabled House of Commons debate on 29 January concerning human rights in Xinjiang, China.



**Aziz Isa Elkun** ▶ From East Turkistan, he is an accomplished poet and independent scholar. Secretary, PEN International Uyghur Centre; researcher at the Uyghur Meshrep in Kazakhstan Project, University of London.



**Dr Rachel Harris** ▶ A Reader in Ethnomusicology at SOAS, specialising on China and Central Asia with a special focus on the Uyghurs. Conducted fieldwork in Xinjiang, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for over 20 years.



**Prof Paul Reynolds** ▶ Foreign policy and international economics specialist having worked in 70+ countries. Formerly with the Central Party School in Beijing, he advises opposition groups in countries facing Chinese-influenced human rights abuses.



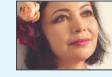
**Dr Anas Altikriti** ▶ CEO and Founder of The Cordoba Foundation; President of the Muslim Association of Britain; a leading figure in the Anti-War Movement.



**Louise Pyne-Jones** ▶ Head of Research, International Observatory of Human Rights; her academic work focuses on religious and colonial ideologies. She is a contributor to *The First World War and Its Aftermath*, *the Shaping of the Middle East*.



**Rahime Mahmut** ▶ London-based Uyghur Muslim who is a human rights activist, singer, and translator. Her translation of *The Land Drenched in Tears*, by Soyungul Chanisheff won English Pen Translation Award.



**Mahmut Turdi** ▶ Uyghur activist, who was forced to flee his city of Karamay in 2001 due to ongoing political persecution. After a brief stay in Malaysia, he settled in the UK in 2002.



**Harun Rashid Khan** ▶ Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain. A civil engineer by profession, he works for Transport for London where he is a senior manager.



**Kyaw Win** ▶ From Myanmar, he is the chair of the Justice for Rohingya Minority and Executive Director of Burma Human Rights Network.



**Yuen Chan** ▶ British-Hong Kong journalist and TV and radio presenter for many years. Former Chinese University (Hong Kong) senior lecturer and founder of Journalism Educators for Press Freedom.



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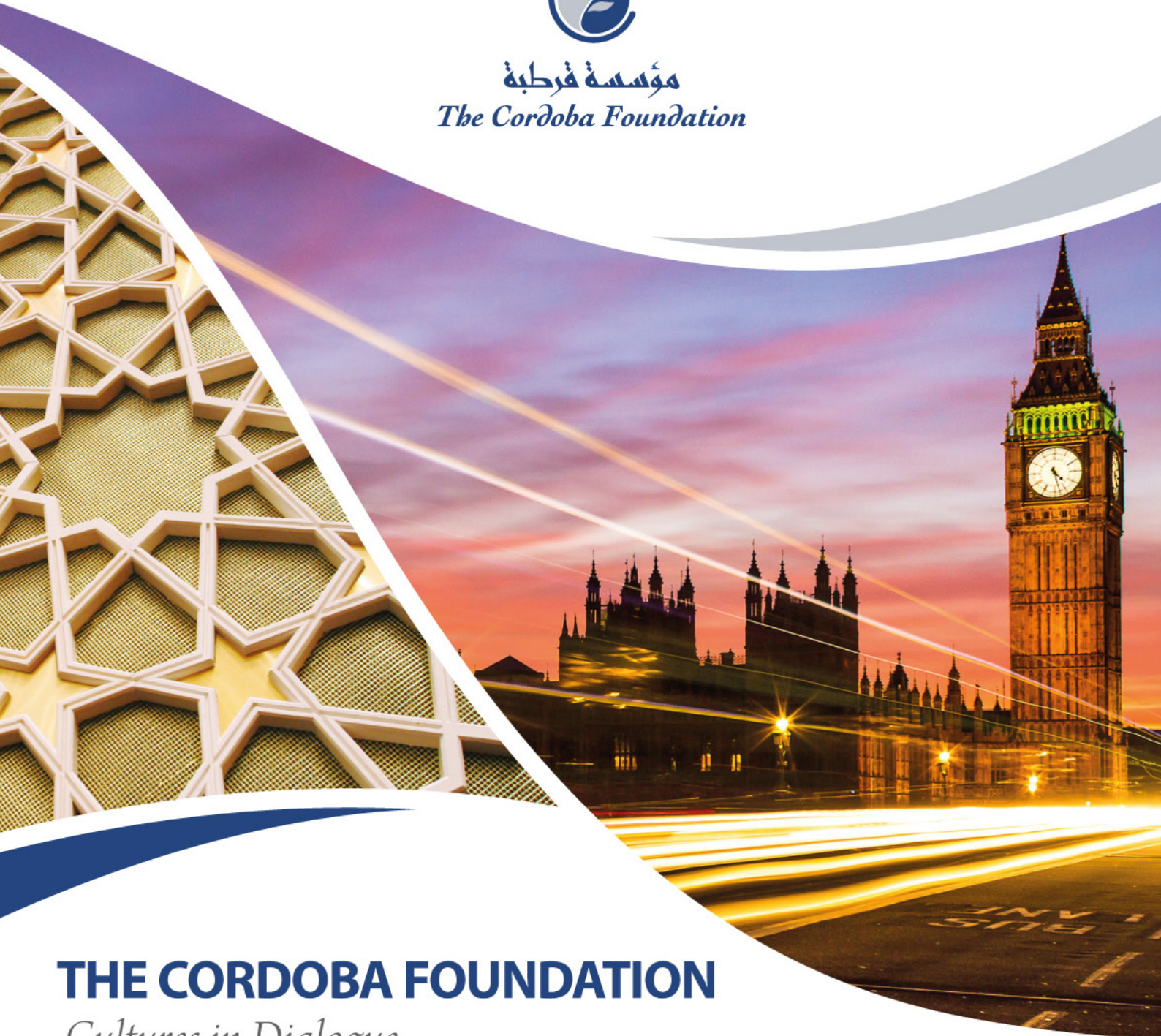
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The Cordoba Foundation (TCF) is an independent strategic think-tank that works to promote intercultural dialogue and positive coexistence through a range of activities including research and publications, training and capacity building, policy briefings and dialogues. The Foundation takes its name from the city of Cordoba – the European metropolis which was once a symbol of human excellence and intellectual ingenuity, where cultures, civilisations and ideas thrived. Embodying this spirit, TCF today facilitates the meeting of minds to advance understanding and respect for one another.

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