

# The Uyghur Diaspora in Cyberspace: Identity and Homeland Cause

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## Abstract

Since the 1950s, the Uyghur diaspora communities have engaged in a wide array of activities to transnationalize the case of Uyghurs in the homeland. Uyghur diaspora have traditionally organized around associations and worked towards transnationalizing the homeland cause through conferences, press releases, printed materials such as books and journals as well as booklets and pamphlets. For the last decade or so though, Uyghur diaspora groups are benefiting from a new means of communication, the Internet. By analyzing different Uyghur diaspora websites and forums, this article aims to examine how the Internet has helped this community to create awareness about the condition of Uyghurs in the homeland. This article also attempts to analyze how the Internet has contributed to a unified national identity as well as to a greater cohesion within the diaspora. At the same time, I compare this recent Internet activity with the actions and discourse of the earlier Uyghur diaspora in order to find out about the parallels between the two discourses.

## Keywords

Uyghur, diaspora, Internet, homeland, national identity

## Introduction

Homelands are central to diasporan identity. It is the homeland that helps diaspora groups to preserve their identity in the host states. Diaspora communities cannot disengage themselves from the homeland and often have some kind of ties with their native land, be it in the form of an economic, social, cultural or political one. When the homeland is under foreign control or there is an unfriendly regime in the country, a diaspora will

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probably have no such ties. Instead they are often involved in diaspora politics which involve a variety of activities in host states to promote the homeland cause.

Since the 1950s, the Uyghur diaspora has engaged in a wide array of activities to transnationalize the case of Uyghurs in the homeland. Uyghur diaspora communities have coalesced around diaspora organizations in host states to enlist support from the international community for the homeland cause. This has involved different aims such as ending human rights violations, limiting the discrimination of Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Eastern Turkistan) and greater autonomy or independence. Mehmet Emin Buğra and İsa Yusuf Alptekin pioneered in Uyghur diaspora involvement in homeland affairs. Based in Turkey, the two diaspora leaders published books and periodicals, established diaspora organizations, visited foreign leaders and organized conferences to promote the homeland cause. This first generation Uyghur diaspora activity established a firm base for later diaspora generations to build on.

Despite the first generation's pioneering activities, the reach of such activities was more limited compared to those of the second generation's. Along with other factors such as the changing international context and the domestic conditions in the People's Republic of China, changes in technology, namely the availability of the internet created new opportunities for the second generation Uyghur diaspora. Through the use of virtual communication means, Uyghur communities abroad have been able to transnationalize the Uyghur cause farther to a much wider audience.

Uyghur diaspora activity in cyberspace will be the main focus of this paper. By examining different Uyghur diaspora websites and forums, I aim to find out how the internet has helped this community to create awareness about the condition of Uyghurs in the homeland and how it contributed to a unified national identity as well as to greater cohesion within the diaspora. There is growing literature on Uyghur diaspora activity in cyberspace (see Gladney 2003, Shichor 2003, Kanat 2005, Petersen 2006, Shichor 2010). These works are helpful in understanding the nature and scope of the Uyghur diaspora's activity on the net. While analyzing online activity and its contribution to Uyghur national identity and homeland cause, I also compare it to the activity and discourse of the earlier Uyghur diaspora. The parallels between the two indicate that there is an important continuation in diasporan activities and that later generations have and are benefiting from past discourse.

## Modern Diasporas and Diaspora Activism

Modern diasporas have become important transnational actors in the last few decades as they increasingly participate in the politics of their homelands. The definition of modern diaspora involves more than the dispersal of people from its original homeland (Butler 2011: 189). Members of a particular diasporan group are consciously part of a larger ethnonational group. It is this self-awareness and shared identity that connects people to their homeland as well as to other members of the diasporan community elsewhere (Butler 2011: 192, Sökefeld 2006: 267). Such diaspora groups are transnational actors as they are usually engaged in homeland related affairs while residing in their host states.

The level of diasporan engagement in homeland affairs is affected by factors such as the homeland being real or symbolic, independent or under foreign control. For example, those diasporas whose homeland is under foreign control are generally more active, particularly when there is an ongoing struggle for independence or for more autonomy in the homeland (Baser and Swain 2010: 38-42). Also within an active diasporan community, not all the members of a diasporan group are actively involved in homeland related issues. Shain and Barth divide the members of mobilized diaspora groups into three categories: core, passive and silent members. Core members are usually the organizing elites while passive members become active only when they are called upon by the core members. Finally, silent members are usually not active, but may mobilize in crisis situations (Shain and Barth 2003: 452).

External factors also affect the level of diasporan activity in homeland affairs. According to Sökensen, the political opportunities such as communication, media, transport as well as legal and institutional frameworks that diasporan communities operate within are important determinants of diasporan engagement in homeland affairs (2006: 270). Such political opportunity structures are defined largely by host states, starting with allowing the activity of diasporan communities within their territories (Shain and Barth 2003: 463-464). Host state related factors are very important in that they may lead the societies decline in diasporism or may lead them to look for new host states that are more permissive (Clifford 1994: 306, Ostergaard-Nielsen 2001: 14).

## Uyghur Diaspora Communities and their Diasporic Activism

Today, Uyghur diaspora communities reside in a vast geographic area stretching from Central Asia to Turkey, from Europe to the United States and from Canada to Australia. While the exact number of diaspora Uyghurs is unclear, estimates indicate that this number is between 500,000 to 600,000, which is about 5-6 percent of the total world Uyghur population (Petersen 2006: 65, Gladney 2009: 17, Shichor 2010: 294-295 ).

The largest proportion of the Uyghur diaspora lives in Central Asia, yet the total number of Uyghurs in the region is uncertain. Shichor suggests that while the number of Uyghurs in Kazakhstan is close to 350,000, this number is probably around 50.000, both in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Shichor 2009). There are also a small number of Uygur communities living in other Central Asian countries. In Turkey, there are an estimated 5000 to 10,000 Uyghurs(Shichor 2010: 294-295, Kellner 2002: 12). The number of Uyghurs living in Europe, North America and Australia is much smaller and estimates are as follows, respectively: 2000, 1500 and 1200. Finally, around 5000 Uyghurs live in Saudi Arabia and some 3000 to 5000 in the Russian Federation. The creation of the Uyghur diaspora is a result of different migration waves, occurring mainly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the worsening conditions in the homeland and the opening up of the borders (Shichor 2009, Shichor 2010: 294-295, Gladney 2009: 17, Shichor 2006).

Settling in such different parts of the world, the Uyghur diaspora has been involved in diaspora politics, depending on the host country conditions, the international context and their own cohesion. The first period of Uyghur diaspora activism began in the 1950s with Mehmet Emin Buğra and İsa Yusuf Alptekin as the forerunners of this period. Mehmet Emin Buğra and İsa Yusuf Alptekin were the leaders of the Uyghur diaspora community who led Uyghur refugees to Turkey during the first wave of migration (Taşçı 1985). Buğra and Alptekin also played prominent roles in the history of the homeland before communist Chinese rule. Later, they would be the ones who continued the struggle for the homeland's national cause within the framework of diaspora politics. Especially at a time when most voices for independence or actual autonomy were silenced in the homeland, the Uyghur diaspora community's activities under the leadership of Buğra and Alptekin appears as an important contribution for continuing the struggle for the homeland cause.

These two community leaders were involved in many activities which made the homeland cause widely publicized and also promoted the cohe-

sion of the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey. As Shichor argues, many of these activities involved conventional means such as the publication of books and journals, establishing associations and organizing events, as well as meeting with international leaders and organizations (Shichor 2003: 288). Such activities seem more modest and limited when compared to the current diaspora politics of today, many of which involve virtual means as a means to facilitate the achieving of diasporic goals.

The second important period in Uyghur diaspora activism dates back to the early 1990s and involves certain changes making this period different from the previous one, such as a wider international audience, better organization and cohesion within the diaspora and the increasing use of virtual communication methods. There are certain historical developments which occurred in late 1980s and early 1990s that are helpful in explaining these changes. The first one of these is related to the domestic developments in the People's Republic of China (PRC). After the death of Mao Zedong, a series of reforms aiming at a relative relaxation in social and cultural fields took place. Mao's death also led to an Open Door policy with the rest of the world which meant increasing interaction with the international community and greater participation in international organizations, which in turn meant more exposure to the pressures and criticism of the international community (Shichor 2006, Shichor 2003: 282).

The second set of factors is related to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The independence of the Central Asian countries, with whom Uyghurs share a common culture, language and history created hopes among Uyghurs and contributed to their seeking of a greater autonomy or independence from the PRC (Shichor 2006, Hyer 2006: 78). Another development related to the demise of the Soviet Union and to the end of the Cold War is the increasing importance attached to human rights by the international community. Together with China's growing exposure to international pressure as a result of its Open Door policy, China's human rights record often became a topic of criticism in its relations with other countries and international organizations (Shichor 2007, Shichor 2006). All these developments, along with changes in communications technology, positively contributed to the second phase of Uyghur diaspora activism.

In both periods of activism, but especially during the second period, the Uyghur diaspora established various organizations in their host countries (depending on the host country's permissiveness to such activities) in order to have an institutional platform to unify their members and to create awareness on Uyghur issues within the host countries as well as within the

international community. In almost every country that the Uyghur diaspora reside in, there is at least one diaspora organization at present. Uyghur diaspora organizations are located in Turkey, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, the UK, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Finland, Japan, Australia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the USA, Canada and Australia.

While the number of Uyghur diaspora organizations has increased, the problem of lack of coordination and unity among them remained an ever pressing problem. Uyghur diaspora leaders were well aware that to be more effective, various diaspora communities should be able to coordinate their activities and unite as a single voice. It was clear that unity among Uyghur diaspora organizations would also help the international community to take the Uyghur cause more seriously (Shichor 2007, Kellner 2002: 15). Such considerations would slowly turn diaspora organizations under a more transnational body. The initial steps towards establishing an umbrella organization, representative of not only various Uyghur diaspora organizations in the world but also of the Uyghurs in the homeland, were taken in early 1990s. With this goal in mind, the First Eastern Turkistan National Assembly (*kurultai*) was convened in 1992 in İstanbul with an inclusive participation of diaspora representatives including those from Central Asia, which became possible only after the independence of the Central Asian states (Kellner 2002: 13). However, this *kurultai* did not produce the anticipated result of a permanent umbrella organization.

In 1999, as a result of the Second Eastern Turkistan National Assembly, the Eastern Turkistan National Congress was established. The ultimate goal of establishing an inclusive transnational body came only in 2004 with the creation of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) as a result of the merging of the Eastern Turkistan National Congress with the World Uyghur Congress. Erkin Alptekin, the son of İsa Yusuf Alptekin, was elected as the first president of the WUC during the first General Assembly in 2004. As of 2006, this post has been held by Rebiya Kadeer. The second General Assembly of the WUC was held in 2006 in Munich, the third one took place in 2009 in Washington, DC and the last one took place in Tokyo in 2012 (World Uyghur Congress website, <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?cat=149> last accessed on 15.07.2012).

The WUC declares as its goal “to promote democracy, human rights and freedom for the Uyghur people” and underlines that it prefers a peaceful and nonviolent method for accomplishing this goal through dialogue and negotiation (World Uyghur Congress website). The WUC, therefore, clearly distances itself from other organizations which do not openly dis-

claim violence. Perhaps a careful discourse as such is necessary considering the international community's sensitivity against the use of terror and violence for whatever the goal in a post 9/11 period.

Uniting almost 30 Uyghur diaspora organizations around the world, the WUC claims to be "the sole legitimate organization of the Uyghur people both in East Turkestan and abroad." After all, the WUC was born as a result of the search for a unified and strong leadership in order to overcome the problems of fragmentation. However, other organizations rejecting such a representative role for the WUC have emerged. The Republic of East Turkestan Government in Exile (ETGE) founded in 2004, is worth mentioning here. However, as Shichor also argues (Shichor 2007), the ETGE is almost a defunct organization now. Like any diaspora community, within Uyghur diaspora there will also not be a total agreement on the goals and methods of the Uyghur cause (Author's Interview with Mr. Alim Seytoff, Esq, Spokesmen for the WUC, President of the UAA and Director of the UHRP, January 2012, Washington D.C). However, the WUC seems to be successful in unifying a high proportion of diaspora organizations as well as having been legitimized by the international community as the representative of Uyghur people both within the diaspora and the homeland.

### **Uyghur Diaspora in Cyberspace**

Diaspora communities have traditionally organized around associations and worked towards transnationalizing the homeland cause through conferences, press releases, printed materials such as books, journals as well as booklets and pamphlets. For the last decade or so though, diaspora groups are benefiting from a new means of communication and are increasingly active in the virtual space.

The Internet has benefited the diaspora groups in various ways. First and foremost, the internet helps diaspora groups to reach a wider audience and therefore create greater awareness within the international community about the homeland cause. Another major benefit is related to the diaspora group members themselves. A diaspora organization's websites, including forums, have increased the participation of diaspora members in matters related to the homeland. Through utilizing such platforms, now diaspora members can share information, get informed about events and coordinate more easily (Brinkerhoff 2006: 31-32, Bernal 2006: 163). According to Bernal, the internet is a transnational space where diaspora members "produce and debate narratives of history, culture, democracy and identity" (Bernal 2006: 161). The internet has the capacity to transform diaspora

members from passive to active ones through increasing the participation of grassroots members and not limiting diaspora politics to a small group of diaspora elite. The internet has also provided diaspora elites with more opportunity to shape national identity (Saunders 2011: 8).

For the last decade or so, Uyghur diaspora communities have increasingly begun utilizing virtual communication means. With the power to reach to wider audience, including interested parties in the host states and other international actors, such use of virtual communication methods contributed to the further transnationalization of the Uyghur case. Along with the goal of enlisting international support, the use of the internet has also contributed positively to greater cohesion and participation within Uyghur diaspora communities. Finally, the internet has provided a platform for Uyghur diaspora elites to further develop and reinforce a modern Uyghur identity with contribution from the grassroots base.

The Uyghur diaspora has long been engaged in activities to transnationalize the Uyghur cause and therefore has tried to enlist the support of the international community. First generation diaspora leaders such as Alptekin and Buğra published books and journals (although most of them in the Turkish language and thus limited in reach) in order to inform the world public opinion and publicize the Uyghur issue. In addition to publishing activities, they visited international leaders and organizations and launched appeals and wrote petitions. Alptekin was particularly active in raising awareness for the Uyghur cause and paid visits to many organizations such as the Muslim World League and the Arab League as well as attending the Bandung Conference in 1955, the Afro-Asian Conference in 1965 and the World Congress of Islam in 1964 (Landau 1995: 118, 150; Shichor 2003: 290).

Despite all these activities, first generation diaspora activism has been more limited in effect in creating the targeted awareness within the international community. As mentioned earlier, there was a set of factors to explain this. One of these factors was the lack of virtual communication means that is available to current generation. As early as the mid-1990s, Uyghur diaspora organizations set up websites to promote an increased awareness about the Uyghur issue. The language of these websites is important in order to understand the targeted audience. Some of these websites are only in the language of the host states, such as Turkish and Japanese (East Turkestan Migrants Association-Doğu Türkistan Göçmenler Derneği website <http://www.Doğuturkistan.com.tr/> last accessed on 28.02.2012, East Turkestan Foundation-Doğu Türkistan Vakfı website



<http://dtv.org.tr/> last accessed on 28.02.2012, Japan Uyghur Association website, <http://uyghur-j.org/main.html>, last accessed on 28.02.2012).

These kinds of sites target an audience limited to those interested in Uyghur issues in the host nation. A second group of sites such as that of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) and East Turkestan Information Center (ETIC) are in a variety of languages including English, Turkish, Japanese, Chinese, Uyghur, German, Arabic and Russian. Clearly the targeted audience is wider and more varied in order to encompass all host countries. Despite the inclusion of the Uyghur and Chinese languages, such sites are inaccessible in the homeland. As the English language is considered a more universal language, the use of English in such websites allows the sites to reach a wider audience, including the Western constituency and legislators who are keener in issues concerning human rights and democracy.

Uyghur diaspora websites usually dedicate an important space to news and press releases on the condition of the Uyghurs in the homeland. While most sites refer to other sources (Radio Free Asia, major media broadcasters and news agencies as well as host country media) some websites such as the Uyghur American Association (UAA), Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) and the WUC prepare their own news reports and press releases. The WUC also has a monthly e-newsletter that contains news and reports that are sent to email subscribers (World Uyghur Congress website, <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?cat=284> last accessed on 28.02.2012). The UAA also provides subscribers with news and updates (Uyghur American Association (UAA) website, <http://uyghuramerican.org/news/> and <http://uyghuramerican.org/press-releases> last accessed on 28.02.2012). The UAA President AlimSeytoff stated that they regularly send press releases to their subscribers which include a diverse audience such as human rights organizations, US government officials and foreign embassies (Author's Interview, January 2012, Washington D.C).

Transnationalizing the homeland cause is a major goal for the Uyghur diaspora. Informing the world public opinion through news and press releases serves this goal. Such news focuses on Chinese policies of religious and linguistic repression, the increasing use of Mandarin, demographic policies aiming to increase Han Chinese population as well as other assimilationist and discriminatory policies (East Turkestan Migrants Association-Doğu Türkistan Göçmenler Derneği website, World Uyghur Congress website, and Uyghur American Association (UAA) website). Indeed, the first generation diaspora leaders such as Alptekin and Buğra underlined such assimilation and sinification policies as being persistent policies

of the Chinese government. For Alptekin, education proved to be an important tool for furthering such policies. Alptekin argued that due to such an education, young Uyghur generations are growing up without learning about their rich past and face the danger of losing their cultural and religious identity by assimilating into Han culture (Alptekin 1967: 12, Taşçı 1985: 35, Alptekin 1976: 3-4). Alptekin and Buğra repeatedly referred to communist China and their policies as “imperialist” in nature. Using such discourse allowed them to strengthen their claims that Uyghurs were indigenous to the land and had a right of self-determination over their territory. The Diaspora leaders’ emphasis on the imperialist nature of Chinese rule was an intelligent move to enlist support from the international community; if we consider the historical context of decolonization of the period.

In a parallel fashion, contemporary diaspora elite have been using a discourse centering on “human rights”, as the international community has placed a higher priority on human rights as of 1990s. The news and press releases that are found in the websites of Uyghur diaspora organizations focus on human rights violations such as political imprisonments, executions for political and religious offenses, religious, cultural and linguistic repression in Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan). Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) under the UAA is solely concentrating on reporting human rights violations in the homeland. UHRP defines itself as a human rights advocacy group with research and publication activities. A research team prepares reports and such reports are published on UHRP site (Author’s Interview with Mr. Alim Seytoff, Esq., January 2012, Washington D.C). While UHRP cyber activities have a unique focus on human rights, other Uyghur organizations’ sites underline human rights abuses along with other issues (Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) website <http://uhrp.org/>, East Turkestan Culture and Solidarity Association-Doğu Türkistan Kültür, Dayanışma Derneği website <http://www.gokbayrak.com/> last accessed on 28.02.2012, Uyghur American Association (UAA) website, Free Skyblue Flag: Voice of East Turkestan- HürGök Bayrak: Doğu Türkistan’ın Sesi website <http://hurgokbayrak.com/> last accessed on 28.02.2012, World Uyghur Congress website, Uyghur Canadian Association website <http://uyghurcanadiansociety.org/>, last accessed on 28.02.2012).

The Uyghur diaspora’s growing activity on the internet has also helped with greater cohesion within diaspora members and members’ increasing involvement in homeland related matters. E-mail groups, forums and websites of diaspora organizations allow members to communicate and network

quickly and easily (Meshrep Uyghur Forum, <http://www.meshrep.com/>, last accessed on 28.02.2012, Uyghur American Association Forum, <http://forum.uyghuramerican.org/forum/forum.php>, last accessed on 28.02.2012). Such communication among members of diaspora in a single host state or across host states was not available for the first generation diaspora. Increased communication allows the Uyghur diaspora to coordinate their activities, which in turn allows for a united and stronger action. Diaspora websites and forums provide a democratic platform for members to discuss a wide range of issues. Such forums increase the participation of diaspora members in homeland affairs by encouraging them to be more involved in issues of concern. They help make the homeland issues not only a concern for diaspora elite but for all members. Also, since anonymity is provided, members can openly discuss issues.

The cyberspace has allowed diaspora elite to contribute to the development of a unified Uyghur identity. Among scholars who work on Uyghurs, there is not a clear agreement on the existence of a unified Uyghur identity shared by all Uyghurs, including those in the homeland and diaspora. Petersen highlights the fragmented nature of Uyghur identity by arguing that: "There is division along religious lines, between competing Muslim Sufi traditions and also between non-Sufi factions. It is also important to recognize that many Uyghurs have fixed territorial allegiances, either based on oases or place of origin, which also include linguistic discrepancies." (2006: 70) Indeed, it was originally Rudelson who argued that "At the oasis level, Uyghur identity is not unified but fragmented along the same lines that separate social groups...These divergent Uyghur self-identifications at the local level pose the greatest challenge to intellectuals' efforts to shape an overarching Uyghur nationalist ideology" (1997: 168). However, later research put forward that such divisions are becoming less important as a separate Uyghur national identity is developing in opposition to Han identity (Kellner 2002: 6, Smith 1999). While there is no consensus among scholars on the issue of a unified Uyghur identity, in cyberspace it is possible to observe a unified Uyghur identity with a common history, culture and language.

As one of the major components of the modern Uyghur national identity, Uyghur history is portrayed in diaspora sites as a glorious or proud one in which Uyghur people had their own independent states and developed a great civilization. According to these sites, Uyghur history dates back 4000 years (Website of the World Uyghur Congress, East Turkistan Culture and Solidarity Association-Doğu Türkistan Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği

website, East Turkestan Foundation-Doğu Türkistan Vakfı website, Free Skyblue Flag: Voice of East Turkestan- Hür Gökbayrak: Doğu Türkistan'ın Sesi website). For the contemporary Uyghur diaspora elite, writing about the history of the homeland is an important tool for claiming a legitimate stake in the homeland. Establishing the people and land connection, that Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan) has always been inhabited by Uyghurs, and that Uyghurs are indigenous to the land helps diaspora to legitimize their cause in the eyes of the international community. With the same goal of firmly establishing the territory and people connection, first generation diaspora leader like İsa Yusuf Alptekin also devoted particular importance to the history of the region. In his book, "Doğu Türkistan Davası (The Cause of Eastern Turkestan)," he presents a detailed analysis of the political history of the region. His aim is to establish that the region had mostly been ruled by independent Turkic states except for short periods of foreign invasion, including invasions by the Chinese.

In diaspora websites, the distinctiveness of Uyghur culture and language are emphasized as well in order to show how Uyghurs and Chinese are totally different people (Website of the World Uyghur Congress, Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) website, East Turkistan Culture and Solidarity Association-Doğu Türkistan Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği website). In these websites, Turkicness and/or Islam are underlined as being the central components of this particular Uyghur identity. Indeed, Alptekin and Buğra earlier underlined Islam and Turkicness, as well. By underlining these identity markers, they attempted to show the difference between their identity and Chinese identity. Alptekin viewed different Turkic groups in Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan) as belonging to one big Turkic family and criticized the Chinese administration's design of these groups as different ethnic groups. He argued that during the different periods of Chinese rule, but especially during the communist period, policies to repress all forms of Turkic and Islamic identity became the norm (Alptekin 1967: 51, Taşçı 1985: 260).

## Conclusion

For almost six decades, the Uyghur diaspora has been vigorously working towards creating awareness on the Uyghur issue and enlisting support from the international community. Due to such activity, the Uyghur cause is better known in the world today. Earlier steps towards becoming the voice of all Uyghurs started with the actions of the first generation Uyghur diaspora. The leaders of this generation, İsa Yusuf Alptekin and Mehmet Emin uğra, were heavily engaged in activities such as publishing of books

and periodicals, establishing diaspora organizations, visiting foreign leaders and organizing conferences to promote the homeland cause. Despite their adamant stance in making the Uyghur cause a transnational one, the historical context of Buğra and Alptekin was different and less conducive to do so. Thus, the first generation's attempts were limited in terms of creating great awareness and enlisting support on the Uyghur issue.

For the last few decades, the Uyghur diaspora has been utilizing a new tool in order to promote the Uyghur issue. The use of this new communication tool has helped the contemporary second generation in different ways. First of all, the Internet has promoted increased communication among Uyghur diaspora members making their actions unified and therefore a stronger one. Especially through their activity in forums and email lists, diaspora members are more engaged in homeland affairs, transforming Uyghur diaspora action limited to elite only.

Second diaspora websites have helped the diaspora in transnationalizing the homeland cause to a wider audience. Predominantly through news and press releases, it has become possible to disseminate information on the condition of Uyghurs in the homeland. This is important considering the fact that there is not much accurate information coming from homeland sources. Diaspora websites and particularly the above mentioned news and press releases mainly focus on the Chinese government's repressive, assimilationist and discriminatory policies towards Uyghurs. In such sources, the dominant theme in the diaspora discourse is the human rights abuses taking place in the homeland. Considering the increasing importance of human rights after the Cold War period, using such discourse is a clever move by the diaspora to get international support.

Finally, the internet has allowed the diaspora to create a modern national identity for Uyghurs. Diaspora often devotes particular attention to Uyghur history, culture and language in their websites. The discourse underlines how different Uyghur culture and language is from that of the Chinese. The Diaspora also establishes the connection between territory and people by claiming that Uyghurs have a 4000-year old history in Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan). The periods of independent statehood are also underlined to show that Uyghurs have the tradition of ruling themselves.

The discourse of the second generation Uyghur diaspora carries many similarities with that of the first generation. Indeed, a careful analysis of Buğra and Alptekin's works reveal that contemporary diaspora discourse borrowed many of the ideas that earlier generation elite had developed.

Particularly in matters related to the Chinese treatment of Uyghurs and creation of a unified Uyghur national identity, Buğra and Alptekin's works contributed greatly to today's virtual diaspora discourse. This continuity of discourses between the two generations is helping the Uyghur diaspora movement have a firm foundational base.

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# Uygur Diasporasının Dijital Ortamdaki Faaliyetleri: Kimlik ve Anavatan Meselesi

Işık Kuşçu\*

## Öz

Uygur diaspora grupları, 1950'lerden bu yana uluslararası platformlarda anavatan meselesini duyurmak için çeşitli faaliyetlerde bulunmaktadır. Bu amaçla dernekler kurmak, konferanslar düzenlemek, basın bildirimleri dağıtmak ve kitap, dergi, kitapçık gibi yazılı basın araçlarından yararlanmak suretiyle sesini duyurmaya çalışmıştır. Ancak yaklaşık son 10 yıldır, Uygur diasporası yeni bir iletişim aracından, internetten yararlanmaya başlamıştır. Bu makalede çeşitli diaspora internet siteleri ve forumlarının incelenmesi suretiyle, Uygur diasporasının internetteki faaliyetlerinin, Uygur milli kimliği ve diasporanın birlik ve beraberliği üzerindeki etkileri incelenmektedir. İnternetin anavatan meselesini uluslararası kamuoyuna duyurmak ve anavatan-daki Uygurların durumlarıyla ilgili kamuoyunu bilgilendirmek konularındaki katkıları da yine bu makalenin konusunu oluşturmaktadır. Makalede bu analiz ilk kuşak Uygur diaspora temsilcilerinin faaliyetleri ve söylemleriyle karşılaştırmalı olarak yapılacaktır. Buradaki amaç ise iki kuşak söylemleri arasındaki benzerliklere ve faaliyet ile söylemlerdeki devamlılığa işaret etmektir.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Uygur, diaspora, internet, anavatan, millikimlik

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## Деятельность уйгурской диаспоры в цифровой среде: проблема идентичности и исторической родины

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### Аннотация

Начиная с 1950-х годов по настоящее время различные группы уйгурских диаспор с целью привлечения внимания мирового сообщества к проблеме исторической родины организуют различные мероприятия на международной арене. В этих целях они пытаются донести свою проблему через создание общественных объединений, организацию конференций, распространение пресс-релизов и различных печатных средств, таких, как книги, журналы, буклеты и т.д. Однако в последние 10 лет уйгурская диаспора начала активно использовать новое средство коммуникации - интернет. В этой статье путем изучения интернет-сайтов и форумов различных уйгурских диаспор, рассматривается влияние деятельности уйгурской диаспоры в интернете на национальную самоидентичность, единство и сплоченность диаспоры. Вклад и роль интернета в привлечении внимания мирового сообщества к проблеме исторической родины и положению уйгур на исторической родине также является предметом исследования данной статьи. Этот анализ в статье проводится путем сравнения с деятельностью и тезисами первого поколения представителей уйгурской диаспоры. Целью работы является показать сходство тезисов двух поколений и преемственность в деятельности уйгурской диаспоры.

### Ключевые слова

Уйгур, диаспора, интернет, историческая родина, национальная самоидентичность

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