

EVAP Ep. 11: Nury Turkel

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SPEAKERS

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Nury Turkel

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one on one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. I'm joined today by Nury Turkel, an Uyghur lawyer and human rights advocate who is currently Vice Chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and Chairman of the Board of the Uyghur Human Rights Project, and a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. Thank you for joining us today, Nury.

N Nury Turkel 01:07

Thank you very much for having me on.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:10

I wanted to start by inviting you to share a bit about your personal journey, from your birth and childhood in China to becoming a lawyer and remarkable advocate for your community here in the US.

N Nury Turkel 01:23

I was born in a reeducation camp during the height of the Cultural Revolution. My young mother, who was pregnant with me, was taken into the custody simply because of her family connection - essentially guilt by association. And also my father was taken away to the labor

camp at the same time. So newly-wedded couple and pregnant mother had to go through this physical abuse, physical and verbal abuses daily at this camp, where I grew up walking by until it was bulldozed and replaced with a shopping mall. The reason that I talk about this extraordinary history and painful reminder of what my family and I gone through in Communist China, now even as a free American to this day, shows that this brutal repression of the Uyghur people by Communist leadership in Beijing is something that has been ongoing. It just happened to be under the guise of a different rhetoric or different justification. Starting from that period, all the way to what we're dealing today, a modern day genocide. I could say it's fair to say that I've seen all of it - my early childhood, and the restoration of some sort of normalcy in our lives in the 1980s and then witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union, seeing several independent states in our neighborhood, and then the Chinese ratcheting up, 9/11, and then fast forward to today's genocide. So those of us who have been advocating for Uyghur people, in my case in the last 20 plus years, we asked the governments around the world and then essentially sounding the alarm that something bad is boiling up in China, something terrible is in the plan. You know, that has been reflected in official lines, propaganda materials, in the way that the regime in Beijing had been dealing with political dissent, even those peacefully, legitimately, legally expressed. So, the international community, including our own government, did not take this warning sign seriously. In the case of our government, in the aftermath of 9/11, Republican administration then, the Bush administration, had a very cozy relationship with Beijing, even acknowledging the existence of some radical groups. In one instance, the Bush administration designated an organization that is not known around the world to most of us as a terrorist organization. And then it moves to the Obama administration during that period. The Obama team was very engaged with China, just push aside some of the human rights concerns. And then the rest of the process has been widely reported. So why am I bringing this up? When we have warning signs displayed, when we see something obvious is happening, we need to stop looking the other way, we need to stop feigning ignorance. We don't have to wait until full swing genocide underway, we don't have to wait until some of the worst humanitarian crisis surface, to act. The atrocity prevention is as important as taking action to stop the atrocious act committed by bad actors around the world. Just in 10 years alone, the international community experienced three genocides - Yazidis to begin with, and then the Rohingyas, and now the Uyghur people. So we can talk a little bit more during the conversation, but what I'm trying to explain to the world is one, this is not a one-off, what Uyghurs are experiencing is not a one-off. And then two, this is no longer just a matter for the Uyghur people to concern, this is on us. And then to three, this shows the deleterious consequences of, you know, going business as usual, or appeasing the dictators and authoritarian regime or individuals who have a power to turn the society into this kind of situation, and also committing fullswing genocide, as we have learned in recent years.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 06:38

I think that's a really important point. You know, many people have documented evidence of the genocide in recent years, but genocide doesn't come from nowhere. There are a lot of steps that lead to sort of a phase where you would label something genocide. Could you talk a little bit about the history that you've alluded to here of persecution against the Uyghurs before the current crisis and what's currently been labeled as a genocide?

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Nury Turkel 07:10

Certainly, and this is something that the audience need to know. The Chinese government have

changed the narrative, the method, but the mindset never has changed. The mindset is the Uyghurs are the others. Therefore, they need to be having a separate set of policies, however that might be, as long as it helps to stop the Uyghurs demanding political freedom, preventing Uyghurs to get inspired from democratic movements around the world, and prevent Uyghurs to continue to become a loud voice, criticizing or resisting some of the harsh policies with respect to religious freedom, human rights, and other aspects of the Uyghur life. In the early period of the Uyghur struggle, the Chinese persecution of the Uyghurs, particularly after the end of the Cold War, the Chinese militarized in its dealing with the Uyghur people by setting up regional organizations such as what is known today as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that established in Central Asia, under the initiation of Russia and China - its headquarters is in Uzbekistan, it's a regional military organization - that they use to squelch political resentment outside of China, that used to scare the local population who have sympathy to the Uyghur cause. They also rounded up Uyghur activist, illegally **refouled** them, deported them back to China. And then domestically, they come up with something called "strike hard campaign", which is essentially just rule out, take out anyone who opposes the regime. And this was a kind of a militarized, securitized, repressive policy, implemented before 9/11, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So in the 90s, there were strike hard campaign, that have this weird slogan: the fight against splitism, extremism and separatism. And then the second wave of repression really started after the 9/11. They added new context, new narrative, that China is also a victim of global terrorism, despite the fact that they were bragging about peaceful Xinjiang just two weeks before 9/11 attacks. That added also a layer of protection in the international arena. In the post-9/11 international environment, particularly in the United States, people are fearful: this country was attacked, and there are some small/large scales of attacks against civilians occurred in Europe. So Chinese effectively use that as an excuse to scare away potential supporters of the Uyghur struggle. And then this takes us to the third wave, and then during this period from 9/11 all the way to 2009, I think that China is already committing crimes against humanity. The reason being is that they initially they used political repression, regional security apparatus to scare domestically and internationally. So, that was not even enough, and then after 9/11 they just truly turned the Uyghur homeland into police state. And then 2000 through 2009, through the recent wave of repression, the collective punishment started. They were already committing crimes against humanity - mass arrest, forced disappearance, demolishing Uyghur historic sites, putting restriction on social and spiritual contacts, book burning, sexual violence against Uyghur women. And then since 2016, August 2016 to be exact, approximately a year after Xi Jinping's visit to the Uyghur homeland, they started today's genocidal campaign full swing, setting up this industrial scale concentration camps, using technology to surveil, not only those inside the camp but also in the society. They also use its global economic diplomatic influence to silence the international community, Muslim countries in particular, or buy that silence from weaker countries or developing countries. And then one other thing that they have done is to use the international organizations such as UN to prevent the agency, the international organization that is essentially set up to address this very issue that we're talking about. So all of the things - ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and genocide - are something that have been underway for some time. You don't even need name or label certain acts, if you look at the nature of the acts committed against vulnerable, religious and ethnic groups, you can say that this is something that has been happening. And my book exactly tells this story - 1970s, 80s, 90s, post-9/11, and then post July 5, 2009, and then the current. So I lived through all of it, both inside and outside of China. So the people should not be surprised that the United States' government in a bipartisan spirit, both the Republican and Democratic administration, recognize the atrocities committed against the Uyghur people as a genocide. There is a reason for that - there's a historic reason, there's a legal reason, there's a moral reason for the United States making that determination.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 13:34

Yeah, I really appreciated in your book, which you've referenced here, which is coming out very soon from HarperCollins, that there have been many crimes against the Uyghur population and this has been building over decades, as you referenced. And in particular, you have a very large section about crimes against women and women in the camps and everything that has happened over the past decades as well as over the last five to eight years since the campaign has ramped up. But I think one of the things that's striking about the Uyghur story and about what you document in the book is that many people who maybe aren't experts in the field of genocide and genocide prevention often think about genocide in this sort of framework of mass killing. And that's not, at least not so far, truly the story of the Uyghur population. What China has been doing is is very meticulous, but it's sort of pulling out rights, committing crimes against people in ways that aren't just physically killing them.

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Nury Turkel 14:54

The 1948 Genocide Convention specifically states that genocide occurs when specific acts are committed with the intent to destroy in whole, or in part, a national, ethnic, racial and religious group. Ambassador Van Schaack, who had just recently been appointed to head the State Department's Office of War Crimes and Global Justice Office, who previously taught at Stanford Law School, specifically argued that the intent can include conditions of life that are calculated to eventually destroy the group that has been targeted. In this case, it's directly applicable to the Uyghur story. In addition to this particular legal element, there are two other actions are seen through personal testimonies, leaked documents, and also governmental reports, which is the Chinese government's naked attack on the Uyghur children by taking up or forcibly separating them from their loved ones, family. And then finally, based on various reports, anywhere between 800,000 to one million Uyghur children have been forcibly separated. And then the last piece, the last legal requirement, as you referenced, is probably the most critical one, which is forced sterilization or purposeful prevention of natural population growth. What we have seen in various reports that have been produced, written based on open source information available on the Chinese open source venues, sites, that the Chinese government has been imposing measures to intend to prevent birth within the targeted group, which is the Uyghurs here. This is probably the most important aspect of what the United States government, two administrations, looked at when determining whether or not this constitutes a genocide and crimes against humanity. The Uyghur women have been targeted by Han Chinese population, with a very subtle encouragement by the state, as long as I can remember. Even as I grew up, because of Uyghur women's look, Eurasian look, they have been subjected to some offensive social comments and, you know, some of it is not appropriate to mention in this conversation. And also, when you look at how the Nazi Germany treated Jewish women, and how the Chinese Communist Party is treating Uyghur women, there are striking similarities. And also, when you look at how Jewish children were treated under the Nazi regime and how Uyghur children treated under the Chinese regime also there is so much resemblance. Why do they do this? Why do they specifically focus on Uyghur women and children? It's not difficult for those of us who can think clearly - it's about the future of this group, of this ethnic, proud, historical ethnic group. What on earth that an ethnic group or society can survive without a vibrant female or woman, mother, children. In my own situation, my mother was my homeschool teacher who taught me the Uyghur language, Uyghur religion, Uyghur values, even some manners how I should hold myself in public. This is all from mother. There is no formal religious education, never been in the society I grew up. The things that I learned from my

mother still lives with me. This is how important, a nation cannot survive without women. So the Chinese knows it very well. Even by their own admission, this was something that they were bragging about. There was a significant decline in natural population growth in just a few years. In the year 2020 there were 25% decline in the Uyghur population. So that's one piece. The other piece is I also have been hearing and included in the book is the sexual violence in the camps. In some instances, those courageous Uyghur women that I interviewed told me that they were witnessing Uyghur women, pretty ones I might add, picked up by the guards and disappeared into the night and then they were returned. In some instances, those Uyghur women just did not return. And I also interviewed somebody who was not profiled in the book, but in the news last year, who told Congress at a congressional hearing, that I testified alongside of her, that she was not only gang raped, but the Chinese use the electric stick to torture her. This was on BBC, this is publicly available.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 21:02

I was really touched by what you just said a few moments ago about your mother and teaching you about culture outside of sort of formal education. And I know that there have been reports documenting the Chinese government making direct attacks on sort of tangible cultural heritage - destroying mosques, destroying burial sites, and important Uyghur shrines. But I think that one of the things that you've alluded to here, when thinking about the future and sort of taking children out of the culture, taking women out of the culture, and you've mentioned it in your book, is sort of detailing that cultural practices of the community are also lost through all of these, you know, forced labor, moving children around, et cetera. So you're losing the food, the music, celebrations, language, bonds between people. So how would you describe the importance of these more intangible cultural elements to the existence of your community, and what does the destruction of that do to the fiber of a community?

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Nury Turkel 22:17

The Uyghur people are Uyghur people because of that cultural identity. You know, if you look at the historical religious practices that the Uyghurs embrace, it could be Buddhism, Shamanism, and Christianity, and then Islam. And then also the Uyghur language is so rich, even in that big chunk of land that makes four times the size of the state of California big cities have its own dialect, even though it's understandable. That's one aspect. And also physical appearance, some Uyghurs look very European, blonde, some Uyghurs look somewhat Asian, some Uyghurs look Middle Eastern, there are a lot of Uyghurs who look Persian. So, you cannot tell by looking at somebody who is Uyghur or not, you can only tell by that person's cultural identity. Culture is what holds the Uyghurs together. But when you look at today, why they are so fixated on destroying the Uyghur language, destroying the Uyghur clothes, destroying Uyghur cemeteries, destroying Uyghur places of worship, and altering the Uyghurs' cultural way of life, like, you know, restricting wedding ceremonies, funeral services, put in quarters and not allowing some rituals. Those are the some of the key objectives of the Chinese state to alter, modify, and they use the term transformation - transforming from what to what? It's a very racist term actually, it's a term that can be interpreted as human in reengineering. Transformation is the term that Stalin used a lot when he was doing a population shuffling. So today in China, even they call the schools as a transformation of vocational training centers. Essentially, they are wiping out all these values, cultural aspects, spirituality out of your mind, by the way, they can break you, they can cause serious mental health, and then replacing it with the ruling Han Chinese culture.

The last time I checked no one said that their culture, their language is superior as such, everyone should be speaking that language or living the way of life that they have. So why do they do this? The central government to the state, as to the Chinese state, two things are very troubling in the Uyghur life - one, their religion, that is foreign religion, Christianity, Judaism and Islam to the communist state is considered foreign religion. In the West, we call it Abrahamic religion. For them, it's a form of religion that comes with creativity, that comes with freedom of thought, freedom of speech that goes on the face of the communist ideology. Therefore, these religious practices, these spiritual group of people, there's not much Jewish people left in China, but there's a sizable Christian population, Catholics for example, and there's a sizable Muslim population in China, including those Chinese speaking Hui Muslims, that's one piece, the Western religion. Even to this day, they use a term such as constant struggle against Western influence. They think that freedom of religion comes with a Western ideology that is toxic to the Chinese state. The other piece is also very important - the Uyghur cultural identity, Uyghur ethnic identity, Uyghur individual identity, Uyghur values, to the Chinese state, to the Communist Party can be perceived as something disloyal. You're supposed to cherish them, you're supposed to worship them, you're supposed to follow their guidance, but this natural daily resistance that has been part of the Uyghur fabric, through the Uyghur values come from the religion, and Uyghur way of life comes from the culture, Uyghur communication comes from the language, were problematic to the Chinese state, but they don't say this, they always use the term such as transformation.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 26:53

I want to turn now to talking about your current work in the US. I think that, you know, one thing that is significant about your career is that you went through all of these experiences growing up in China. And once you came to the US had to make some significant sacrifices in terms of your own connection to your culture and your family and from how frequently you can see your parents to obviously how connected you can be to where you came from. Your book ends on a powerful note about your resolve to always speak up - always speak up for your community and always speak up for populations who are suffering. And I feel like that sentiment is very intimately linked with your work now as a commissioner and vice chair for the US government, as well as your work with the Uyghur Human Rights Project. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you've done in that role?

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Nury Turkel 27:55

I would say that I have been fortunate and it's been a privilege to be in this noble fight. There are a lot of people in the Uyghur homeland who would like to have the type of platform that I have, who would like to have the type of access I have, have the type of experience that I have to advance the cause. What I have been best told I would say, after coming to the United States and particularly starting my law school years, one is the education and while being in the nation's capital, and access. You know, this is a wonderful city. You can go to meet with members of Congress, you can socialize with congressional staffers, you can also meet with the civil servants in the executive branch and if you know somebody, somebody will know somebody, you can get connected. And this is an amazing town for even connecting with the policy experts. There are think tanks, they organize meetings, events, you go, listen and learn. So this natural environment was perfect. And also the other reason was not on my own choosing, which was 9/11. I was in law school, and was in my second year in law school, when

9/11 attacks happen. I was sitting in my contracts class trying to figure out some ancient British laws. I thought that I spoke English and were able to read, I was reading the same page 15 times trying to make sense of it. And mainly that was my first two weeks in law school and 9/11 happened. It hit me hard because as somebody from that vulnerable, religious and ethnic community in China. And I worried that the same group of Muslim people might be subjected to social racial discrimination in the United States. You know, we have to be realistic, this country was attacked by a group of self claimed Muslims, a lot of people killed. And I was I was able to see the smoke from the library window at my law school, coming on the Pentagon direction. So it was very personal on many levels. And I had, you know, classmates, schoolmates of Afghan origin and we were hugging and comforting each other. And I had Jewish classmates. And I had even classmates whose family members were in Twin Towers, they managed to escape. So it was a dramatic expense. And I was worried that, not only that I might be feeling the heat in the United States, but I was worried that what does this mean for the Chinese state that were looking for an excuse. I'm not trying to say that I envisioned that this will help happening, but I did expect the Chinese would misuse this. So that was the beginning of my Uyghur activism life. I was in law school, I had a lot of time to think, read, write emails, contact members of Congress. The primary goal then was to make sure that the United States does not end up in agreement with the Chinese claim that they're also fighting terrorism. And then, you know, during the law school, I realized that, you know, this has to be a professional operation. People respect you when you engage in professional operation, even though this is something so out of your compassion, out of your commitment to the community, out of your desire to give back to the community. So with the generous support from the National Endowment for Democracy I co-founded the Uyghur Human Rights Project. The purpose is to have a professional, kind of human rights think tank that produces a firsthand research and documentation so that we can present it to the government officials at home and abroad, that they can use to make policy. And it worked. And then I, you know, was fortunate also enough to work on Guantanamo cases, that was one of my most challenging legal exposure to constitutional law, international criminal law in very complicated diplomatic engagements. And I took up a leadership role. I thought that it was time for me to play a leadership role. I led the Uyghur Human Rights Project as the first executive director and the president Uyghur American Association, which represents the collective interest of the Uyghur people in the United States. And then I, you know, two years ago I got a call from Speaker Pelosi's office asking if I'd be interested in playing a bigger role. You know, I called and I answered the call, it was a terrific opportunity. And I cannot be more grateful to Speaker Pelosi to give me this platform. This, you know, unique position, that I can be a government official, and then also an advocate not only for the Uyghurs, you know I am also advocating for those who are underrepresented. I recently picked up a cause - antisemitism, rise of antisemitism in Europe, and also Islamophobia. I've been speaking out against the Indian government for its treatment of the Muslims in the India. I've been speaking out against Russia and other countries, for its mistreatment of Jehovah's Witnesses. And then I'm also speaking out against Sunni majority governments for its treatment of the Shia Muslims. So this has been an amazing, incredibly empowering experience, that I can use my legal background. Even though I'm not trained as a human rights lawyer, I'm an anti Trump, anti corruption, anti bribery lawyer essentially. And I'm using that for advocating a good corporate practice in the context of cleaning out global supply chain of the forced labor produce products. So it's been an amazing experience. I could not be more grateful, and I have this policy work. So I've been fortunate, but it's not been easy. This has been very costly for me. My human rights work came at a huge personal cost. Soon after I was elected as president of the Uyghur American Association and started with the Human Rights Project the Chinese confiscated my parents' passports. And since my law school graduation in 2004 I haven't been able to see my mother. My father recently passed away, but I could not be there to hold mom and carry that casket. Because last December, the Chinese sanctioned me in response to the policy

pronouncement by the Biden administration that includes the diplomatic boycott, that includes additional global Magnitsky sanctions, that includes the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act that, if that were enacted, that also includes the additional Entity List designation, which is a kind of an export ban measure that this Commerce Department keeps. Initially, that list was used for national security, but in the Uyghur case, it has been used for human rights purposes. So in retaliation, the Chinese sanctioned me and three other commissioners. So out of nine commissioners serving at you serve seven of us have been sanctioned. So I don't even know. I wrote about my mother and me and my dad, in light of the way that I was brought to this world, in a reeducation camp. And now in the last 28 years, I was only able to spend 11 months with my parents, with my mom, now, who's still alive. Gives you a sense how the fact that I have only been able to see my mother, spend 11 months with my mother, gives you a sense that what I have been going through, what my family has been going through. And this is something that the general public, especially in free societies, may not be able to appreciate because who would want or talk about or complain about spending too much time with the family members or mother, or mother with the children? That kind of basic stuff was taken away from me. What appears to be a retaliation against what I have done for the community - for the international community, as well as my Uyghur community. So if you asked me if it's been difficult - yes. I feel that I've aged prematurely in the last four or five years in particular. I don't get much sleep. I breathe and live with conversation relates to genocide and crimes against humanity. When I hear the stories by Rohingya community I can immediately relate to it. When I listened to older Holocaust survivor, Jewish ladies, it reminds me of the Uyghur ladies that I profiled in my book. When I listened to even President Zelenskyy it reminds me of my own miserable life, begging politicians and policymakers to do the right thing, even though it's not exactly the same type of frustration. So yeah, it's exhausting. I am mentally exhausted, physically exhausted. But on the positive side, as I wrote towards in the book, fighting back, we made so much progress in the last two, three years. This is not a lost cause. This is still a noble cause to fight because this is not only about Uyghurs anymore. So if you really care about the promise, the vow "never again", this is where you need to show that it means something. And if you really care about, you know, human liberty, then you need to say no to forced labor or slave labor products. If you really respect your privacy and respect the privacy of others, you need to say no to Chinese developed surveillance techniques. The equipment stand as metastasizing. At least 83 countries are currently using or are in the process of using Chinese surveillance equipment. And I also wanted to make another point to make it relevant - our country has a history of slavery, cotton trade, for example. I think it's immoral, unconscionable that American mothers, fathers forced to hold a baby that are wearing baby pajamas made of Uyghur cotton, made by a fellow human slaves in a modern era. I also wanted to call on attention, call the international community's attention, the American people's attention to two things - one, the Hollywood, the other is the Silicon Valley, that are dead quiet. In any type of issues that are convenient for Hollywood celebrities, they use the platform that they have, they use the influence that they have to provide a megaphone. We're not seeing it, even after this genocide is so well known and widely reported in print media and TV media, it's still deafening that there is no single powerful voice coming from Hollywood advancing. It is un-American, because of the Hollywood's interest to sell more movies, that staying silent, and yet you are comfortable criticizing this government, that individual debt entity, except for China. I think it's unconscionable. And then the other piece is more broad business, a message to the business world. I've seen business community, a significant number of businesses, either pulling out, suspending their business practices after Putin's invasion of Ukraine in just two, three days. It is shameful that we haven't seen a single business entity, American company, that says no to slavery, no to slave labor. And yet they're still sponsored genocide Olympics, in the case of Coca Cola, Nike and Visa, Airbnb. And then finally, we can talk about Chinese technology firms that are developing a testing and exporting the surveillance equipment. But we cannot lose

sight over the Silicon Valley that is providing the hardware and software to these entities as well as the venture capitalists investing in those Chinese technology. So this is our problem. This is America's problem. We as consumers could do only so much, but it's time for business leaders, Hollywood celebrities, Silicon Valley engineers to do some soul searching.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 42:24

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention. If you'd like more information about the Global Centre's work on R2P, mass atrocity prevention or populations at risk of mass atrocities visit our website at globalr2p.org and connect with us on Twitter and Facebook at GCR2P.