

Analysis of the Content and Relevance of the “High-Risk Individuals From Xinjiang Suspected of Crossing the Border Illegally” Internal Police File

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Summary and motivation

On November 10, 2024, the *New York Times Magazine* [published a long read](#) concerning the dozens of Uyghurs who were being held in detention in Thailand for over a decade, following a failed attempt to flee China. As part of the story, the authors attempted to give an illustration of the number of Uyghurs who had fled China in general, appealing to an internal police file that they had access to and suggesting that it was indicative of the scale:

No one knows how many people have fled Xinjiang over the past 15 years. In the course of our reporting, we obtained an internal Chinese government document that suggests the scale of the exodus: a spreadsheet created sometime before 2018, titled “High-Risk Individuals From Xinjiang Suspected of Crossing the Border Illegally,” containing the names and personal details of 17,743 Uyghurs — including many of our interviewees and more than two dozen of the men currently detained at Suan Plu.

In late December 2024, I requested a copy of the file from one of the authors and, upon receiving it, did a quick analysis, by crossing the individuals in the file with the individuals we had documented in the Xinjiang Victims Database. To my surprise, close to 1500 were already documented as victims, which was unexpected as we typically document people detained in Xinjiang and not those who fled abroad. Furthermore, a number of the victims were not Uyghurs but Kazakhs, who had gone abroad legally and/or had not been detained, only [having their documents confiscated](#) while in Xinjiang in 2017-2018.

For me, this quick and superficial analysis was sufficient indication that the file had been improperly characterized by the authors, and that despite its title did not actually

list, in its majority, individuals who had fled China. Consequently, it was not appropriate to use it to suggest the scale of the exodus. I reported this to the authors at the beginning of January 2025 and suggested that they revisit the file to do a more in-depth review, as their description of its content and the suggestion of the scale of exodus may have been erroneous. A few days later, I received a reply in which one of the authors stated that they did not see the issue, prompting me to go into more detail and note that of the ~17000 people on the list, only around 1000 were categorized as having tried to flee abroad or as having fled abroad, while the majority of the others were categorized as people who had gone abroad legally, or were relatives of otherwise sensitive individuals. For a month, there was no reply, and when I asked again was made to understand that the authors did not consider this a priority, and was told that they “stood by their reporting” and were not planning to make changes, despite a total lack of serious attempt to engage with any of the (detailed) arguments I had put forth. The categories in the file, I was told, were inaccurate and could not be taken at face value. When I raised the issue again and continued insisting on a correction, the authors told me that they had given their final comments and that there was nothing more they could really do on their end.

To fully clarify why a correction is necessary, I have now carried out a detailed analysis of the file, [crossing information regarding over 1000 individuals](#) on the list with detailed internal records that clarify their situations (and which both I and the authors should have access to). As a general conclusion, I stand by the assertion that the file in question is not suggestive of the scale of exodus by Uyghurs from China, that the authors’ description of the file is not accurate and misleads the reader, and that it should either be corrected to better match reality or be removed altogether, if the former is not possible. Less seriously, the quantity “17743 Uyghurs” is inaccurate as well, since the list only has 16766 individuals (977 are repeats) and since at least hundreds of them are Kazakh (not Uyghur).

Description of the main file

The Excel spreadsheet has a total of 17743 rows corresponding to 16766 unique individuals (977 of the rows are duplicates). The fields specified for each individual (the columns) are:

- category: a tag applied to the person (13 total, summarized below)
- gender
- citizen ID number
- full name
- household registration address
- recommended action (in most cases, “notify place of household registration”)
- unit entering the case into the system (for around 10000, these are various public security units in Xinjiang, for around 1200 they are public security units in inner China, and for around 5400 the field is left empty)
- a 0-1 status under the acronym QQZT, which I have not been able to decipher (this is possibly 确权状态, or “authorization status”, for internal use; around 1300 people have this set as 1)

The 13 categories, from largest to smallest, are summarized in the table below.

category	category (original Chinese)	people
individual with whereabouts unknown	去向不明人员	3664
in same household as individual who crossed the border normally but did not return	正常出境未归人员同户人员	3356
“Hijrat gang member”	“伊吉拉特” 团伙成员	2497
individual having normally crossed the border but not returned	正常出境未归人员	2322
in the same household as individual abroad	境外人员同户人员	2063
in same household as deceased member of "violent terrorist gang"	已死亡暴恐团伙成员同户人员	1369
detained while trying to cross border illegally	非法出境被抓获人员	543
in contact with person who illegally crossed the border, prior to the fact	非法出境人员出境前同行人员	500
another type of individual with inclination to leave the country	其它具有出境倾向人员	205
individual who sold off property and moved out with entire family	变卖家产举家外迁人员	107
individual having illegally crossed the border to go abroad	非法出境至境外人员	94
individual repatriated after crossing border illegally and being detained	非法出境被抓获遣返人员	40
university dropout students	辍[辍]学高校学生	6

Method of analysis

The analysis that was carried out sought to answer two key questions:

- Is the list composed mainly of individuals who had/have fled China at some point in the past 15 years (and is therefore indicative of the scale of the exodus written about by the authors)?
- Are the categories assigned by the police to the individuals internally consistent or otherwise insightful, allowing us to make certain general statements about the people in those categories?

As part of their reporting, the authors found that dozens of the people they interviewed or who were being interned in Thailand were included in the list, presumably leading them to conclude that the entire list was indeed of Uyghurs who had fled the country (very understandable given the file's name). However, this is a very biased and small convenience sample – since the authors focused their interviews on the subject of Uyghurs who had fled China, it is natural that anyone they interviewed who happened to be on the list would be an Uyghur who had left China, and likely illegally. For the same reason, the initial list of around 1500 documented victims that I provided to the authors in January 2025 (people who were documented in the Xinjiang Victims Database as detained or likely detained and were also in the list) was biased as well – since the database essentially documents detainees, it is natural that any individuals from the list it found would be those who had not fled China (by virtue of being interned there). Even though it established that at least 1000 of the people in the list were people who had not fled, it still left open the possibility that the vast majority of the others were people who had.

When wishing to make general statements about the nature of a document with many individuals, there are essentially two legitimate approaches:

- Doing a comprehensive review of *all the individuals* in the list. (full census)
- Taking a random sample and doing a review of those individuals. (probabilistic sample)

While neither is possible in this case since both require us to be able to crosscheck the actual situation of any person on the list, we can still do a fairly legitimate analysis by focusing only on individuals from the Konasheher and Tekes counties, for which we have

nearly complete information thanks to the [Xinjiang Police Files](#). These files cover almost every single individual from these two counties, with many appearing in between 5 and 20 different files. In statistical terms, this could be called a “full census of a subgroup”. Because the subgroups here are 2 of Xinjiang’s ~90 counties, it is very likely to be representative if we assume that the two things we are studying (accuracy of categories and relation between category and having fled abroad) do not vary significantly from county to county.

This leaves us with over 1000 people, of whom around 200 are from Konasheher and 800 are from Tekes. In a small number of cases, the individuals, despite being from these counties, did not appear in other police files and were excluded from the analysis (as it was impossible to check their situations), leaving a total of 1014. For each person, other records [were crosschecked](#) to see if:

- the category applied to them appeared internally consistent;
- they had any record of attempting to go abroad illegally (successful or not);
- they successfully fled the country – illegally crossing the border – for a prolonged period of time, in most cases still being abroad today (since returning would very likely result in arrest).

The overall numbers are provided in the table below, with the remainder of this document discussing the results for the relevant categories. As there are only 40 “individuals repatriated after crossing border illegally and being detained” and 6 “university dropout students” in the list, with none of them from Konasheher or Tekes, this category was not analyzed. In some cases, there may be small differences in the total counts, as a result of a lack of information in the available police files regarding a certain person (in which case, one of the three questions listed above was skipped for that particular person – for example, while other police files made it clear that a given person never fled the country, they may have lacked the information necessary to judge if the category applied to that person was accurate or not).

category	sample size	category consistent	tried to flee abroad	fled abroad (successfully)
individual with whereabouts unknown	22	15/22 (68.18%)	14/22 (63.64%)	9/22 (40.91%)
in same household as individual who crossed the border normally but did not return	322	319/320 (99.69%)	0/322 (0%)	0/322 (0%)
“Hijrat gang member”	90	83/90 (92.22%)	13/88 (14.77%)	1/90 (1.11%)
individual having normally crossed the border but not returned	483	483/483 (100%)	1/483 (0.21%)	1/483 (0.21%)
in the same household as individual abroad	38	36/38 (94.74%)	4/38 (10.53%)	4/38 (10.53%)
in same household as deceased member of "violent terrorist gang"	19	19/19 (100%)	0/18 (0%)	0/18 (0%)
detained while trying to cross border illegally	10	5/10 (50%)	8/10 (80%)	3/10 (30%)
in contact with person who illegally crossed the border, prior to the fact	8	0/8 (0%)	0/8 (0%)	0/8 (0%)
another type of individual with inclination to leave the country	5	3/5 (60%)	2/5 (40%)	2/5 (40%)
individual who sold off property and moved out with entire family	17	8/17 (47.06%)	0/17 (0%)	0/17 (0%)
individual having illegally crossed the border to go abroad	12	5/12 (41.67%)	6/12 (50%)	4/12 (33.33%)
totals		976/1024 (95.31%)	42/1011 (4.15%)	21/1014 (2.07%)

In general, it is seen that the categories applied by the police are consistent, with information from other files essentially confirming them in over 95% of cases. Furthermore, only a small fraction of those in the study sample is seen to have attempted to flee the country, with even fewer having fled successfully.

As the exact proportions can vary from category to category, a more detailed category-by-category review is done below, with the relevant conclusions for each also given.

Category analysis: “individual with whereabouts unknown”

This is the largest category in the list, with 3664 people (over 20% of the list). Our study sample in this case is unfortunately somewhat small, with only 22 people. However, the 22 cases that we have information for show that the category is very flexible.

First, it is very possible and even likely that a significant portion of the people in this category are abroad, having fled there illegally. 9 of the 22 (close to half) of the individuals in the study sample fit this description.

At the same time, the category also appears to include people who left their home jurisdiction, relocating to other parts of Xinjiang (and potentially becoming “lost” to the police in their home jurisdiction). In some cases, it also seems to be outdated, being applied to individuals who were detained and sentenced, in some cases after failed attempts to flee the country. For these, their whereabouts obviously aren’t unknown anymore, as they are in detention.

On the whole, it seems safe to say that the category is accurate or was accurate at some point, as in 15 of the 22 cases we can find additional information that either confirms the category explicitly or gives specifics that explain why police would categorize the person this way.

As the best possible estimate, we can say that $3664 \times 9/22$, or around 1500, people in this category are those that fled abroad successfully, but the error margins here would be very large (given the small sample size).

Category analysis: “in same household as individual who crossed the border normally but did not return”

This is another very large category, with over 3000 people and making up around 20% of the list. Over a tenth of them (300+) are from Tekes County and have relatively comprehensive information available.

At least around 70% of the 300+ are people with links to Kazakhstan, many of them Kazakh. While the category suggests them to be relatives of people who relocated abroad (“normally”, i.e. legally), a number of the people are also people who have relocated themselves, in some cases getting Kazakh citizenship. For example, the family of [Sarsenbek Akbar](#), a government official who spent around 2 years in detention in 2017-2019, belongs to this category (even though many of them moved to Kazakhstan and obtained citizenship). No one in this category is reported to have fled the country, with all indications that those who did go abroad went abroad legally, and frequently via the Kazakhstan-China land border.

Overall, the category is believed to be consistent, as essentially everyone in this category can be found to have a relative who went abroad with a passport (or are themselves someone who went abroad legally).

Based on the 300+ sample from Tekes County, it seems very unlikely that anyone in this category of 3000+ fled the country illegally (with the possible exception of singular cases).

Category analysis: “Hijrat gang member”

This is the third largest category, with nearly 2500 people. The study sample size is decent (90 people), and consists mostly of people from Konasheher. Of these, 83 (over 90%) are marked as having “Hijrat” links in some form or another in other records, suggesting the category to be internally consistent.

While the term “Hijrat” itself is suggestive of trying to flee China and go to an Islamic country, a review of the individuals in this category shows that the majority of the people labeled this way did not actually do this, and in many cases did not even attempt to do so. In many cases, “Hijrat gangs” appear to be local associations of friends or acquaintances, sometimes family members, who were targeted by police for religious or “extremist”

activity (with the content directly/indirectly related to “Hijrat”). The vast majority are documented as having been given long prison terms, in cases that often involved entire groups. Many, but not all, of these detentions took place prior to the 2017-2019 incarceration period.

Some illustrative cases of people in this category include:

- [Islam Ismayil](#), who appears to have been one of the central figures in the December 15, 2013 [violent incident](#) in Konasheher County. He was shot dead together with many others.
- Eight friends/acquaintances from [Qarabagh Village](#) who were all given long sentences in 2012 for listening to religious sermons, which involved “Hijrat” content.
- A group of over 10 people, allegedly headed by [Imam Tursun](#), who were all detained in 2013 and given long sentences (Imam was sentenced to life) for alleged “terrorist” gatherings that police claim involved terrorist training, without any mention of them actually trying to leave the country.
- The “April 29 Hijrat gang” case from 2012, where at least 7 people were detained and sentenced (without any mention of attempt to flee).
- The “November 21, 2013 Hijrat gang” allegedly headed by [Nurmemet Tohti](#), where at least 12 people were given long terms (Nurmemet was given life in prison) for allegedly “terrorist” gatherings/training. No mention of going abroad is made.

The cases above, as well as several others, involve multiple people who appear in multiple records, but with no indications of the groups or any of their members trying to flee the country, with the units entering their cases into the system also based in Xinjiang (and not inner China).

A small number (13 of 88) of cases do show an attempt to escape the country. Of these, essentially all appear to have been caught either during the process or shortly before. The only exception is of [Rehim Obul](#), who despite being arrested and sentenced is still reported as going illegally to Myanmar and Pakistan (suggesting that he succeeded in going to these places before the detention).

Based on the above, it is likely that almost none of the “Hijrat gang members” are people who fled abroad successfully, with the vast majority likely serving prison terms and the majority detained prior to 2017. If talking about an attempt to flee the country (regardless

of success), then the best guess based on the study sample is that around a seventh of the ~2500 (around 300-400) did.

Category analysis: “individual having normally crossed the border but not returned”

A large category of over 2300 people, with close to 500 of them from Tekes County and having relatively detailed information available about them. This is a very large study sample (over 20% of the total).

The characteristics of this group are very similar to those of the “in same household as individual who crossed the border normally but did not return” category, in that a very significant portion of these individuals are Kazakhs who have gone abroad legally, to Kazakhstan, with a passport. There is also a small handful of cases of Uyghurs who flew abroad to Egypt, Malaysia, or Europe from the central airport in Beijing. Over 90% of the cases are people who have gone to Kazakhstan, however.

Only one individual appears to be an exception, in the sense that he is reported as having obtained a fake Russian passport to leave the country, so as to avoid being detained in a drug trafficking case against him. However, there is no indication that any of the other ~500 did anything of the sort, suggesting this to be a fringe case.

Consequently, it appears safe to conclude that essentially everyone in this category is a person who went abroad legally, with a passport, and has not fled the country illegally.

Category analysis: “in the same household as individual abroad”

This is another major category, with over 2000 people. The study sample here is modest (38), and is split between the Konasheher and Tekes counties. 36 of them have been identified as having relatives abroad, suggesting the category to be internally consistent.

Of the people in the study sample, only 4 (around 10%) are seen to have fled abroad, with the majority either having no evidence of such a flight – despite appearing in multiple records – or being explicitly reported as being in the region.

Based on this, it appears likely that only a minority (probably around a few hundred) of the people in this category are people who fled abroad, as would be expected given the

category name (which suggests this to be mostly relatives of people abroad, not the people abroad themselves).

Category analysis: “in same household as deceased member of ‘violent terrorist gang’”

This is the last major category, with close to 1400 people. The study sample is modest, with 19 people, all of them from Konasheher County.

The category name suggests this to be relatives of people who were killed in violent (“terrorist”) incidents, and this is consistent in 100% of the cases, with all 19 people identified as having specific relatives who were killed by the state in various circumstances. As with the other “same household” categories, it is suggested that the people here are relatives of sensitive individuals and only sensitive by association.

Of the 18 people in the study sample for whom relatively detailed records are available, no one is seen to have fled abroad, with some of them elderly (including those who had already passed away prior to 2015) and many of them underage minors. Around half of them have been documented as detained.

Given the internal consistency of the category name and the fact that none of those in the study sample are seen to have left the country, it appears likely that the vast majority of the 1369 in this category have never fled China.

Category analysis: “detained while trying to cross border illegally”

This is a smaller but significant category, with over 500 people. Furthermore, the name suggests that all of these people are those who attempted to flee the country illegally, but failed. The sample size is small, at 10 people, but suggests that there may be some inconsistency in this category specifically.

3 of the 10 people are reported to have fled the country in 2013 and to not have returned (contradicting the label of being detained). 2 people – [Emetjan Qawul](#) and [Ablimit Tursun](#) – have been given long prison terms, but with nowhere in the records indicating that they tried to flee. The remaining 5 are all those who have tried to flee the country and were

detained, with the category consistent for these five individuals.

Based on this, we can estimate that the vast majority of the 500+ people are indeed people who tried to flee the country, with a significant portion (but not all) being caught and likely sentenced.

Category analysis: “in contact with person who illegally crossed the border, prior to the fact”

Another small but significant category, with exactly 500 people. Only 8 people are in the study sample, with no explicit mention of whom they were in contact with who fled abroad. To err on the side of conservatism, we mark this as lack of consistency, but it may be that this type of information is too detailed (police records often focus on relatives abroad, and less on contacts/friends, though the latter can also appear).

There is no mention of anyone in this group as having fled the country themselves, and the most likely assessment – added to the category name – is that the majority of the 500 people did not.

Analysis of smaller categories

The smaller categories of “another type of individual with inclination to leave the country”, “individual who sold off property and moved out with entire family”, and “individual having illegally crossed the border to go abroad” – which total to fewer than 500 people – all appear to pertain to people who left the country or planned to.

Of the 5 known people belonging to the “another type of individual with inclination to leave the country” category, 2 are found to have fled abroad. The other 3 are not, having been given long prison terms.

Of the 17 known people (all from Konasheher) belonging to the “individual who sold off property and moved out with entire family” category, about half are confirmed to have left their home county, partially confirming the category name. None are seen to have attempted to flee abroad, with the majority seen to have been detained.

Strangely, of the 12 people in the “individual having illegally crossed the border to go

abroad” category, only a third (4) are seen to have fled illegally. A number are seen to have gone abroad legally, with a valid passport, in some cases being detained later.

Overall, it appears likely that these three categories taken together probably include a few hundred people who fled the country illegally.

General conclusions with regard to people having fled

Summarizing the analyses for the individual categories above, we can estimate the following as making major contributions to the number of individuals having fled the country:

- **one to two thousand** from the “individual with whereabouts unknown” category;
- **a few hundred** from the “in the same household as individual abroad” category;
- **around a hundred** from the “detained while trying to cross border illegally” category;
- **a few hundred** from the smaller categories.

Consequently, a reasonable assessment would be that **no more than 3000 people** from the list are those who have fled the country illegally, as based on the trends and relations that become apparent when crosschecking the data with a sample of over 1000 people from the counties of Konasheher and Tekes.

Recommendations to the authors

The authors are strongly urged to correct the original text, which is misleading, as it gives the impression that the over 17000 (rows of) people in the file they cite are indicative of the scale of the exodus of Uyghurs from China in the past 15 years (Uyghurs who fled the country illegally). As demonstrated by the detailed analysis above, only a few thousand of the people from the list are likely to have fled the country, which is an order of magnitude lower than that suggested by the authors. While the scale of the exodus *might* be in the tens of thousands, the file cited by the authors does not support this argument and should not be presented as evidence for it, since the link is erroneous in nature.

Additionally, the characterization “17743 Uyghurs” is incorrect as it includes 977 repeats and ignores the fact that hundreds of the people included are Kazakh (people from other

ethnic groups, such as the Uzbeks, are present as well, but are unlikely to influence the count significantly as their populations in Xinjiang are much smaller).

Because the original paragraph as written by the authors is largely based on the idea that the spreadsheet cited is an insightful indicator of the scale of exodus, I do not know if attempting to rewrite the paragraph while accounting for the above is advisable. **My personal recommendation would be to delete the paragraph altogether**, as it does not really affect the development of the article and would not change much (the subsection that it starts would just start at the paragraph that follows).