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“Leaked Files” and China’s Ethnic and Religious Polices

(Research Report)

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On Nov. 16, 2019, the *New York Times* reported that it acquired 403 pages of “leaked files” from “a member of Chinese political establishment”. The content of those files concerns China’s ethnic and religious policies and counter-terrorism and de-radicalization efforts in Xinjiang. ¹

Since from *New York Times* reported the “leaked files” on November 16th, no think tank or research institution has conducted any research and analysis on it. This possibly was because the source of documents is unclear, and its authenticity is not verifiable. Despite their lack of authenticity, the content of the “leaked files” can be used as a reference and attracts public attention to Chinese long-term ethnic and religious policy and practice.

China is a multi-ethnic country. Since 1949, there have been 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities. China established five provincial-level ethnic autonomous regions. In 1984, the Central Government of China implemented the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy, which brought legal basis to China’s ethnic policies and management measures.

The ethnic policy of China has been

applied for 70 years. Ethnic relations were stable for most of that time. The shift from a planned economy to a market economy transformed the situation for ethnic districts as well as other districts in China. In the process of transformation, different social problems occurred in ethnic districts. In Xinjiang, apart from the transformational problems brought by reform and opening up, religious extremism, ethnic separatism, terrorism and violence have long plagued society. These conditions pose hazards and challenges to the development of Xinjiang and the stability of the western area. The violent terrorist incidents between 2009 and 2015 demonstrated Xinjiang’s problems to others in inland provinces. These attacks, widely covered by the media, have imbued fear among viewers. The direct response of many in inland provinces was “what’s going on in Xinjiang?” This involves a major question: what ethnic and religious policies is the Chinese government pursuing in Xinjiang? Or is there any policy issues? What goes wrong? The governance of Xinjiang is confined to the mass media’s mechanical reports on policy. It is difficult to grasp the ethnic and religious policy pursued by Chinese

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>

government unless there is long-term field research and study of Xinjiang. This report about “leaked files” from *The New York Times* offers an opportunity to answer these questions.

Based on the text of “leaked files” from *The New York Times*, this research will be conducted from the following questions:

1. According to the text of “leaked files”, what ethnic and religious policies are applied by Chinese government in Xinjiang?

2. Is there any difference between the document’s version of ethnic and religious policies in China’s in Xinjiang and official version? If there is, what’s the specific difference?

3. Some western media claim that the measures of Chinese government against terrorism is repression toward certain minorities. Do the “leaked files” prove this?

4. Does the “leaked files” from *The New York Times* provide valuable clues or not for future research?

The situation of anti-terrorism

The background of the policies Chinese government pursues in Xinjiang were introduced in the “leaked files.” The main content is a series of violent terrorist attacks that occurred in Xinjiang in the last few years. These attacks were a catalyst for Xinjiang’s new policies in this period. With regard

to terrorist attacks that happened in Xinjiang, the *The New York Times* reported: “In 2014...two Uighur militants staged a suicide bombing outside a train station in Urumqi that injured nearly 80 people, one fatally. Weeks earlier, militants with knives had gone on a rampage at another railway station, in southwest China, killing 31 people and injuring more than 140. And less than a month later, assailants tossed explosives into a vegetable market in Urumqi, wounding 94 people and killing at least 39.”

In 2014, *The New York Times* reported two attacks in Urumqi, the “April 30” train station bombing, and the “March 01” attacks in the Kunming Railway Station. These two attacks had been defined as terrorist attacks by Chinese public security departments. Due to ideological bias, *The New York Times* did not use the phrase “terrorist attacks” in regard to these cases, but terms, such as “militants”, “suicide bombings”, “rampage”, and “toss explosives.” This reporting did show the reality of violence and the threat of terrorism brought by militants since 2012.

These two cases as mentioned by *The New York Times’s* report, like all cases of violence and terrorism related to Xinjiang, are influential and widely known. How many cases have taken place, but are not widely known?

According to *The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang* White Paper issued by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China in 2019, "incomplete statistics show that from 1990 to the end of 2016, separatist, terrorist and extremist forces launched thousands of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang, killing large numbers of innocent people and hundreds of police officers, and causing immeasurable damage to property."² As mentioned in White Paper, these "several thousand" terrorist attacks spanned more than 20 years. The description of these cases in White Paper is quite simple so requires further research. Though the number "several thousand" seems fuzzy, people who understand the context of China can feel the seriousness of the problem. Xinjiang is faced with a severe terrorism threat which has spilled over to other provinces. It is one of the important logical starting points of various aspects of Xinjiang governance.

The terrorism threat that China faces not only comes from country

inside but also from abroad. "A senior Chinese leader" was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying, "After the United States pulls troops out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate into Central Asia. East Turkestan's terrorists who have received real-war training in Syria and Afghanistan could at any time launch terrorist attacks in Xinjiang." For the situation of "East Turkistan" terrorist organization activities, international scholars and think tanks have produced from results, but the overall degree of concern stays low for some reasons. For instance, American Jamestown Foundation regularly publicizes the activities of "East Turkistan" terrorist organization in China;³ another US terrorism research website, Long War Journal, also often publishes research about the international activities of "East Turkistan" terrorist organization;⁴ a research institution in France published a report about the "East Turkistan" terrorist organization in Syria.⁵

²http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-03/18/content_5374643.htm

³ Jacob Zenn. 2011. Jihad in China? Marketing the Turkistan Islamic Party. Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/TM00906.pdf?x87069>

⁴ Weiss, C. (2015). Turkistan Islamic Party had significant role in recent Idlib offensive. Retrieved from <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/turkistan-islamic-party-had-significant-role-recent-idlib-offensive.php>

⁵ Vagneur-Jones, A. (2017). War and opportunity: the Turkistan Islamic Party and the Syrian conflict.

In China, it is rare to see research about the “East Turkistan” terrorist organization in Central Asia, West Asia and the Middle East. So far, it could only be seen from some reports of media. For instance, *Global Times* reporters got a piece of material about “East Turkistan” terrorists training in the south of Turkey and the north of Syria during an interview in Qatar. Viewing from the photos and videos, “East Turkistan” activities in Syria and southern Turkey has reached a certain scale. In the photos, their training camp occupies a considerable area surrounded by the walls, a camera probing above walls. Except for the militants, their families are also in the camp. Wearing camouflage uniforms, equipment, machine guns, AK-47 assault rifles and grenades, some “East Turkistan” militants sit cross-legged to discuss the matter, or arms around eating and drinking together. In addition, there are some “explosion pictures” of bomb attacks in Syria, as well as a picture showing a “East Turkistan” militant carrying a banner of al-Qaida outside the camp.⁶ The *Global Times* quoted a Chinese national counterterrorism official’s words: “After issuing secret

instructions to Syria “jihad” from al-Qaida, the “East Turkistan Islamic Movement”, with orders from al-Qaida, deploy capable personnel from Afghanistan and the border region of Pakistan in batches in Syria. The militants join forces with other jihadi groups Syria, and then make up an independent group to war.”⁷ The “China Youth network” quoted an official of the anti-terrorist branch in Chinese government: terrorist organization “East Turkistan Islamic Movement” began operations after al-Qaida issued an order. There are two main purposes of the “East Turkistan” group. One is “training” and another one is an attempting to seek “recognition” and “help” from international terrorist forces. The international community should quickly help Syria to eliminate the conflict, and if the international terrorism forces get united, it could not be a gospel for any country”.⁸

The scattered report about the “East Turkistan” organization of international activities from media, coupled with the lack of domestic academic research means this problem has not effectively got attention from

Retrieved from
<https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/war-and-opportunity-the-turkistan-islamic-party-and-the-syrian-conflict-07-2017>

⁶<http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2013/12-17/5626485.shtml>

⁷<http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2012/10-29/4283515.shtml>

⁸http://pinglun.youth.cn/wztt/201210/t20121030_2562869.htm

China. But from *The New York Times's* so-called “leaked files”, China’s understanding of the potential threat of “East Turkistan” terrorists is adequate.

Ethnic Policy

When Western media report how the Chinese government governs Xinjiang, one of the most common arguments is the reason of violent terrorist activities in Xinjiang is Chinese government’s “repression” and “discrimination” of the Uyghurs. Western reports regard it as “the resistance against oppression.” This rhetoric is devoid of any actual investigation and is a subjective judgment. However, it has become a kind of default and unchallenged “politically correct” assertion after being disseminated for many years. The core problem is that there is no empirical research to explain the relationship between violent terrorist activities in Xinjiang and the Chinese government’s policy in Xinjiang. In other words, does the Chinese government’s “crackdown” lead to persistent and violent terrorist activities or vice versa? In the absence of sufficient empirical research of scholars, it is difficult to have a convincing answer. But *The New York Times* report of the “leaked files” gave the outside world a rare opportunity to further explore this issue.

When discussing about how to deal with ethnic relations, *The New York Times* “leaked files” report shows some “surprising” speeches of “high-level Chinese officials.” Such as: “to not discriminate against Uighurs and to respect their right to worship... [no to] overreact to natural friction between Uighurs and Han Chinese, the nation’s dominant ethnic group.” The speech revealed the attitude of China’s leadership towards ethnic issues; one of the core elements is respect. The reason for *The New York Times’* “surprise” is that Western media have had a fixed framework for reporting on Xinjiang, which amounts to saying “the government’s crackdown on Uighur led to a revolt.” *The New York times* did not reveal more, but this “statement from Chinese leadership” is clearly consistent with China’s established laws and ethnic policies.

The constitution of the People’s Republic of China states that “all nationalities in the People s Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China s nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any acts that undermine the unity of the nationalities or instigate their secession

are prohibited.” In 1984, the National People’s Congress of China passed The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy, which had a clear statement on ethnic relations and religious beliefs in ethnic regions in Article 9 and 11:

“Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality shall be prohibited; any act that undermines the unity of the nationalities or instigates national division shall also be prohibited... The organs of self-government of national autonomous areas shall guarantee the freedom of religious belief to citizens of the various nationalities. The organs of self-government of national of national autonomous areas shall guarantee the freedom of religious belief to citizens of the various nationalities. Religious bodies and religious affairs shall not be subject to any foreign domination.”

Speeches by Chinese leaders also play an important role in shaping and formulating China’s policies. To further examine the relationship between the “leaked documents” and the Chinese government’s ethnic policy, this study looks at the speeches of Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC central committee, on ethnic affairs in various occasions in recent years.

Xi Jinping once said that “China is a unified, multiethnic country, which

becomes a major factor in our country’s development.”⁹ It can be seen from this standpoint that the communist party leadership does not see the reality of multi-ethnic states as a hindrance or a drag on China’s development. Instead, they treat it as a valuable component of society. In September, Xi Jinping mentioned nine “Make-Sures” in his speech at the national recognition of the unity and progress of ethnic groups. Among the contents on ethnic relations and ethnic unity are “accelerating the development of ethnic minorities and ethnic minority areas, and constantly meeting the aspirations of people of all ethnic groups for a better life; Insisting on cultural identity is the deepest identity, and building the common spiritual home of the Chinese nation.”¹⁰ You can see from this speech that one aspect of the communist party leadership focus on ethnic work is development, the other is to strengthen the rule of law. That is to say, ethnic issues should be solved step by step within the framework of law.

Regarding harm brought by violent terrorist activities in Xinjiang, *The New York Times* quoted “senior Chinese leaders” words: “the violence was spilling from Xinjiang into other parts of China and could taint the party’s image of strength. Unless the

⁹<http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/28322717>

¹⁰<http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/31378052>

threat was extinguished, social stability will suffer shocks, the general unity of people of every ethnicity will be damaged, and the broad outlook for reform, development and stability will be affected.” China’s top leaders are stressing ethnic unity as a prerequisite for reform, development and stability and giving a higher priority to national unity than the international community has traditionally thought.

In 2017, Xi Jinping has said that “we will heighten public awareness of ethnic unity and progress and create a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation. We will encourage more exchanges and interactions among different ethnic groups, helping them remain closely united like the seeds of a pomegranate that stick together, and work jointly for common prosperity and development.”¹¹ In addition, in a speech on ethnic work in 2016, Xi Jinping said “to do a good job in ethnic work, the most important thing is to promote ethnic unity, and the most effective thing is to win the hearts and minds of the people. To correctly know me through the mainstream of the national relationship, see the bright side of national unity, good at unity of the masses, to the heart, the whole society with communication, culture, harmonious emotional work,

strengthen exchanges between various nationalities communication, respect for differences, inclusive diversity, let all ethnic groups in the big family of the Chinese nation mutually close, mutual care. Use the law to ensure ethnic unity, enhance the legal awareness of the people of all ethnic groups, resolutely oppose Han chauvinism and narrow nationalism, and consciously safeguard the highest interests of the state and the overall situation of ethnic unity.” It can be seen in all of Xi Jinping’s statements on ethnic work, the content of national unity, ethnic integration, respect for differences, tolerance for diversity and legal guarantees are consistent. It also clearly reflects the coherence of China’s ethnic policies. *The New York Times* was “surprised” by the “leaked files” in which the “Chinese leadership speeches” said it should respect Uighur culture and religion, and refrain from overreacting to the conflicts between Uyghur and Han Chinese, probably because they don’t realize that this is part of the Chinese government’s ethnic policy.

China’s system of regional ethnic autonomy is an important part of China’s ethnic policy. In recent years, social problems in some border areas of China, international and domestic doubts about the system of ethnic

¹¹<http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/29613458>

regions have also increased. To this, Xi Jinping said in a speech: “Regional ethnic autonomy is the source of the party’s ethnic policy, and all our ethnic policies are derived from and based on this. If this source changes, the foundation will be shaken and a domino effect will occur on issues such as ethnic theory, ethnic policy and ethnic relations. Regional ethnic autonomy is not the autonomy enjoyed exclusively by a particular ethnic group, nor are ethnic autonomous areas unique to a particular ethnic group. We should combine unification with autonomy, and integrate ethnic and regional factors, implement the provisions of the constitution and the law on regional ethnic autonomy, and help ethnic autonomous areas develop their economies and improve people’s wellbeing.”¹² This speech clearly affirmed the system of regional ethnic autonomy, and emphasized specially the emphasis of regional ethnic autonomy is the combination of “regional autonomy” and “ethnic autonomy”.

Religious Policy

Xinjiang is a region where many religions have coexisted throughout history. Buddhism has once prevailed there. Islam is currently the dominant

religion. Islam was introduced to China in the Tang Dynasty and has a history of more than 1,000 years. It is one of the major religions in China. In recent years, the penetration and spread of religious extremism in Xinjiang resulted in violence and terrorism, which pushes the Chinese government to adopt a series of measures to fight religious extremism and polarization. However, some Western media report that the counter-terrorism policy of the Chinese government is designed to “eradicate” Islamic. Then, what is the Chinese government’s policy on Islam? Is the Chinese government taking Islam as the source of terrorism?

For these problems, “A senior Chinese leader” was quoted by *The New York Times* as saying, “In light of separatist and terrorist forces under the banner of Islam, some people have argued that Islam should be restricted or even eradicated. [This view] is biased, even wrong”. From this quote, the top of Chinese Communist Party doesn’t define Islam as the source of violence and extremism in Xinjiang and does not want to eradicate Islam. Actually, Both the Chinese Constitution and various laws have content protecting freedom of religious belief and legal religious activities. According to Article 2 of the Regulation on Religious Affairs

¹²<http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/28322717>

promulgated by Chinese government, “Citizens shall have the freedom of religious belief. No organization or individual shall compel citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in any religion (hereinafter referred to as religious citizens) or citizens who do not believe in any religion (hereinafter referred to as non-religious citizens). Religious citizens, non-religious citizens, and citizens with different religious beliefs shall respect each other and live in harmony.” Clearly, the legal status of all religions in China is equal, and no religion has a higher status than any other. The status of all believers and non-believers is also equal.

For religious extremism, Article 63 of the regulations on religious affairs provides that “Whoever advocates, supports and subsidizes religious extremism or makes use of a religion to endanger the national security or public security, to undermine ethnic solidarity, disintegrate the country or carry out terrorist activities, to infringe upon the personal or democratic rights of any citizen, to disrupt the order of social administration, to encroach upon public or private properties, or to carry out other illegal activities shall, if a crime is constituted, be held criminally liable in accordance with the law. If

such conduct has not constituted a crime, he shall be given administrative penalties by the appropriate department according to law. If any loss is caused to a citizen, legal person or another organization, he shall assume civil liability according to law.” Therefore, carrying out the work of de-radicalization is also within China’s legal framework.

Beyond religious affairs legislation, this research also refers to Xi Jinping’s speeches in recent years.

Xi Jinping said in a speech at the Arab league headquarters in 2016 that “the spread of terrorist and extremist ideas poses a serious challenge to peace and development. Countries need to have consensus about the fight against terrorist and extremist forces. Terrorism knows no borders. There is no distinction between good and bad terrorism. And there should be no double standards in fighting terrorism. For the same reason, terrorism shall not be linked with any specific ethnic group or religion, as it will only create ethnic and religious tensions.” This speech shows that Chinese government’s cautious attitudes in dealing with the terrorism and extremism, that is, not linking terrorism and extremism to any particular religion or ethnic. The movement primarily aimed at preserving ethnic solidarity domestically. It also contributes to

counter-terrorism cooperation internationally. In other words, the Chinese government opposes terrorism as an ideology, not any specific religion or ethnic group.

In Xi Jinping's speeches on religious work, one thing that stands out is his emphasis on religious leaders. Xi Jinping said at the First Session of the 12th National People's Congress in 2013 to "give full play to the positive role that religious figures and believers play in promoting economic and social development, and do our utmost to rally all the possible forces around us."¹³ During the Xinjiang inspection tour in 2014, Xi Jinping said: "I hope the broad masses of religious leaders in Xinjiang continue to carry forward the patriotic love of good tradition, a clear-cut stand against religious extremism, converts a correct understanding through the guidance of scientific solution by religious doctrine, let everyone to relax economic development, and improve your life."¹⁴ At the 14th group study session of the Politburo of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2014, when it comes to fighting against terrorism Xi Jinping said that "We should also let patriotic religious personages play a role, enhance positive guidance for

religious believers, meet the latter's normal religious needs, and effectively resist the infiltration of religious extremism."¹⁵ As it can be seen, religious leaders are a key part of the Chinese government's religious policy, especially when it comes to correctly guiding ordinary believers, helping believers shun religious extremism.

Islam is one of the world's three major religions. In the Arab world, most countries are Islamic countries, Islam plays an important role in the social life of these countries. Xi Jinping said in a speech at the Arab league headquarters in 2016 that "like the diverse species in Mother Nature, cultural diversity gives life to our planet. The Middle East is the meeting place of ancient human civilizations and home to diverse and splendid civilizations and cultures. China will continue to unswervingly support Middle East and Arab states in preserving their ethnic and cultural traditions and oppose all forms of discrimination and prejudice against specific ethnic group and religion." It shows that in the eyes of Xi Jinping, there is not only Islam in Arab countries, but also rich Arab culture. China will not harbor discrimination and prejudice on Islam, but combat

¹³<http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/20816352>

¹⁴<http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/24963845>

¹⁵<http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/27406262>

discrimination and prejudice against Arab culture and the Arab nations.

Summary

China's ethnic and religious policies and anti-terrorism practice have been criticized by the outside for a long time. One of the reasons is that the policies and measures are generally presented in the form of files. With related research focusing on the Chinese academia and various types of academic papers, it is difficult to fully understand and spread to the outside world. *The New York Times* report, which is mainly about the Chinese government's policies in Xinjiang, become a rare entry to patiently research and review Chinese government's ethnic and religious policies China, in particular for the senior leadership's view of religious and anti-terrorism issues. Particularly, it can provide a valuable option to study the Xinjiang governance policies of China.

Based on the analysis of "leaked files", this report finds that some of the coverage of *The New York Times* neither exceeds nor contradicts China's current ethnic, religious, counter-terrorism and de-radicalization policies, which are all publicly available. The so-called "leaked files" coverage doesn't provide credible evidence supporting claims such as "China is eradicating Islam" or "China is persecuting its minorities."

Besides, both "leaked files"

coverage and various speeches of senior Chinese leaders all demonstrate the target of China's counterterrorism and de-radicalization measures is terrorism & extremist ideologies and not any particular ethnic group or religion.

In the process of researching "leaked files", this study also found some problems on previous research and options for further research. For instance, the "leaked files" quotes "senior Chinese leadership's word: "Islamic extremism had taken root across swaths of Uighur society." However, Western academia generally believes that Uyghur society is following non-extreme religious traditions, and only part of it were influenced by extremism. In Chinese academia, research about the extremism in Uighur community do exist, but in-depth study on "take root" and "how" can't be found. Therefore, this topic needs more in-depth study for future research. Moreover, the "leaked files" reveal the Chinese leadership's concern toward Uyghur extremists' activities in the Middle East and South Asia, which should be the focus of further research.