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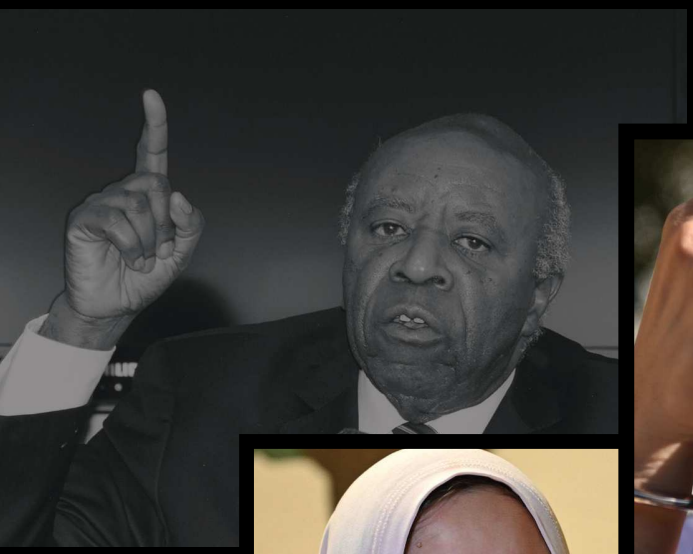

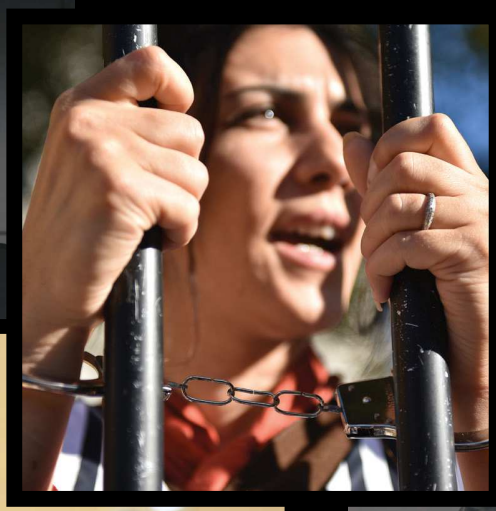

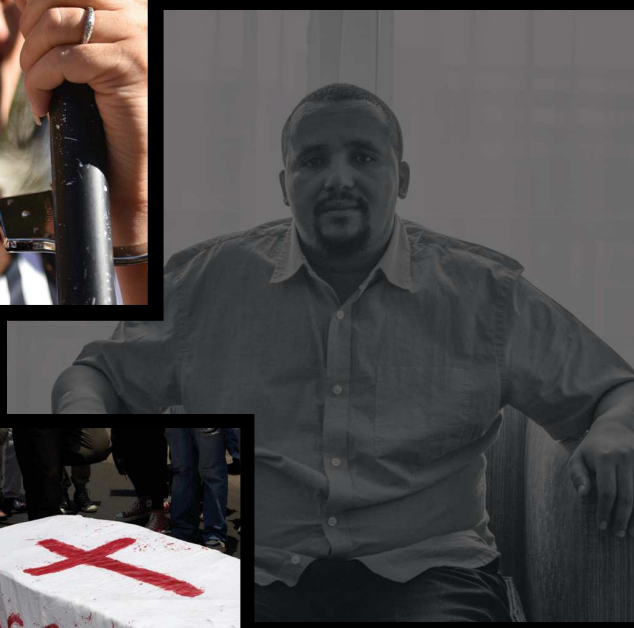

Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach

The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression

Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer

OUT OF SIGHT, NOT OUT OF REACH: THE GLOBAL SCALE AND SCOPE OF TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ON THE COVER

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Executive Summary

Rwandan opposition leader and former prime minister Faustin Twagiramungu speaks at an electoral rally in Gisenyi after returning from eight years of exile. Image credit: MARCO LONGARI/AFP via Getty Images.

This report is the product of an effort to understand the scale and scope of "transnational repression," in which governments reach across national borders to silence dissent among their diaspora and exile communities. Freedom House assembled cases of transnational repression from public sources, including UN and government documents, human rights reports, and credible news outlets, in order to generate a detailed picture of this global phenomenon.

The project compiled a catalogue of 608 direct, physical cases of transnational repression since 2014. In each incident, the origin country's authorities physically reached an individual living abroad, whether through detention, assault, physical intimidation, unlawful deportation, rendition, or suspected assassination. The list includes 31 origin states conducting physical transnational repression in 79 host countries. This total is certainly only partial; hundreds of other physical cases that lacked sufficient documentation, especially

detentions and unlawful deportations, are not included in Freedom House's count. Nevertheless, even this conservative enumeration shows that what often appear to be isolated incidents—an assassination here, a kidnapping there—in fact represent a pernicious and pervasive threat to human freedom and security.

Moreover, physical transnational repression is only the tip of the iceberg. The consequences of each physical attack ripple out into a larger community. And beyond the physical cases compiled for this report are the much more widespread tactics of "everyday" transnational repression: digital threats, spyware, and coercion by proxy, such as the imprisonment of exiles' families. For millions of people around the world, transnational repression has become not an exceptional tool, but a common and institutionalized practice used by dozens of regimes to control people outside their borders.

Freedom House's research shows that:

- **Transnational repression is becoming a "normal" phenomenon.** The global review identified more governments, using the same tools, in more incidents than is typically understood. The states that run transnational repression campaigns deploy a broad spectrum of tactics against their perceived enemies, from spyware and family intimidation to renditions or assassinations.
- **Most physical transnational repression involves co-opting host governments in order to reach exiles.** The most common forms of transnational repression—detentions and unlawful deportations at the origin state's request—entail exploitation of the host country's institutions. Most renditions also involve working closely with host country authorities to illegally transfer people to the origin country. In this way, transnational repression directly undermines the rule of law in the targeted host country.
- **The consequences for transnational repression are currently insufficient to deter further abuse.** Stopping transnational repression will require reestablishing international norms that support universal due process and punish extraterritorial violence.
- **The full spectrum of transnational repression tactics matters.** Online harassment, coercion by proxy, mobility controls, and use of spyware do not garner the same level of attention as assassinations, but these less visible forms of transnational repression are intimately connected to physical attacks. Any effective response to transnational repression needs to address this continuum of practices.

The report consists of an introduction, a description of the methods of transnational repression, case studies on six states—China, Rwanda, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—conducting significant transnational repression campaigns, regional summaries covering countries not in the case studies, and recommendations.

Freedom House's recommendations focus on what policymakers can do to hold perpetrators accountable for transnational repression and increase resilience within democracies.

Consistent **accountability**, especially in the form of targeted sanctions, will raise the cost of transnational repression for the regimes in question. **Resilience** efforts, especially measures that reduce opportunities for authoritarian states to manipulate institutions within democracies, will make it harder to attack exiles and diaspora communities in practice.

A thorough approach to resilience must include the recognition that excessively harsh policies intended to deter migrants and asylum seekers facilitate the external exploitation of a host country's institutions, making it more likely that a persecuted individual will be denied asylum, deported, or otherwise mistreated. In order to proactively counter transnational repression, host countries should build trust with migrants through sustained outreach that informs them about their rights and the resources available to protect them.

Transnational repression is a serious threat to human rights and to democracy around the world, but with accountability for perpetrators and compassion for its targets, it can be stopped.

Introduction

Detainees stand behind bars at an immigration detention centre in Bangkok on January 21, 2019, during a visit organized by authorities for journalists. Image credit: Romeo Gacad/AFP via Getty Images.

An Iranian journalist in Europe wakes up and opens a spear-phishing email on his phone. The family of a Uighur woman in Canada is put in a labor camp in China; when they are released, they call and warn their exiled daughter to keep quiet as a Chinese official looks on. A Russian man who fled to the United States after security services stole his business is held on a frivolous Interpol notice and kept in US immigration detention for a year and a half. A Tajik opposition activist applies for asylum in Austria but is deported to Tajikistan based on a Tajik government request; when he returns, he is tortured and imprisoned. A Rwandan opposition leader is abducted while in transit through the United Arab Emirates and reappears three days later in Kigali, facing trial for "terrorism." A Turkish teacher is pulled off the streets of Kosovo and bundled onto an airplane to Turkey. Saudi agents asphyxiate and dismember a US-based Saudi journalist inside the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul.

All of these are real examples of "transnational repression," in which governments reach across national borders to silence dissent among diaspora and exile communities. They are emblematic of an enormous and growing threat to people all over the world who are struggling for democracy, or just exercising their basic human rights. Authoritarian states large and small are employing a variety of aggressive tactics to control their citizens, or sometimes even foreign nationals, residing abroad.

This report is the product of an effort to understand the scale and scope of transnational repression by compiling cases from public sources, including UN and government documents, human rights reports, and credible media outlets. The goal is to generate a detailed picture of a global phenomenon, specifying who is doing what to whom and where.

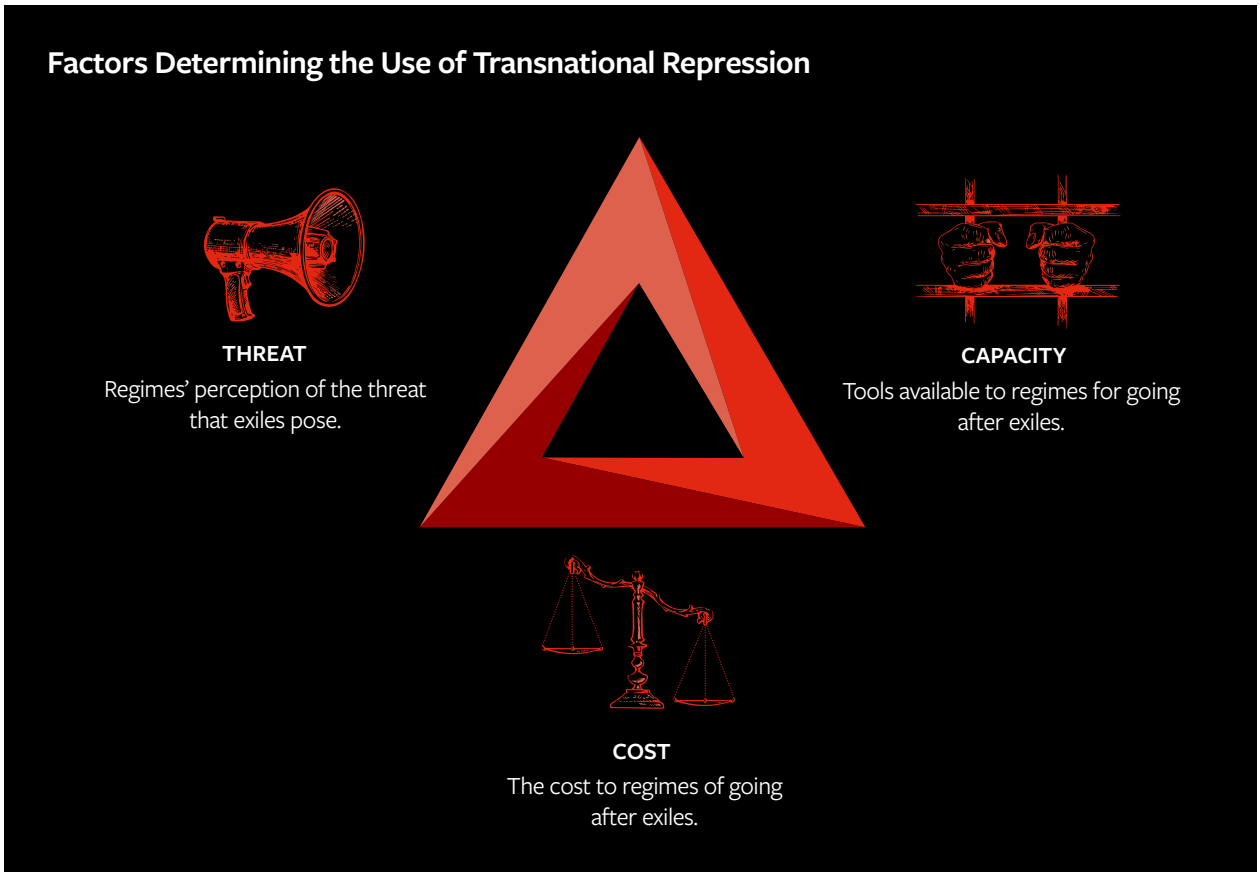
The project assembled a catalogue of 608 direct, physical cases of transnational repression that occurred in the period from January 2014 through November 2020. In each of these cases, the origin country's authorities physically reached an individual living abroad, whether through detention, assault, physical intimidation, unlawful deportation, rendition, or suspected assassination.[1] **The list includes 31 origin states conducting physical transnational repression in 79 host countries, with 160 unique pairings between host and origin countries.** The compilation is certainly only partial; hundreds of other physical cases that lacked sufficient documentation, especially detentions and unlawful deportations, are not included in Freedom House's count.[2] Nevertheless, even this conservative enumeration shows that what often appear to be isolated incidents—an assassination here, a kidnapping there—actually represent a pernicious and pervasive threat to human freedom and security.

> The project compiled a catalogue of 608 direct, physical cases of transnational repression.

Physical transnational repression is itself only the tip of an iceberg. The consequences of each physical attack ripple out into the larger community. And beyond the physical cases compiled for this report are the much more widespread tactics of "everyday" transnational repression: digital threats, spyware, and coercion by proxy, such as the imprisonment of exiles' families. For millions of people around the world, transnational repression has become not an exceptional tool, but a common and institutionalized practice used by dozens of governments to control people outside their borders. In essence, transnational repression is a means of injecting authoritarianism into another polity, imposing the origin country's restrictions on individuals who live in ostensibly more free environments.

Freedom House's research shows that:

- **Transnational repression is becoming a "normal" phenomenon.** The global review identified more governments engaging in recognizable patterns of transnational repression, and far more frequently, than is typically understood. Most offending states deploy a spectrum of tactics, ranging from spyware and family intimidation to renditions or assassinations. It is no longer unusual for regimes to target "their" citizens beyond their borders—it is par for the course. This is true both of large, powerful countries like China, and of smaller and less influential countries like Burundi. Democracies must act at home and abroad to prevent the further normalization of extraterritorial persecution.
- **Most physical transnational repression involves co-opting host governments in order to reach exiles.** The most common forms of physical transnational repression—detentions and unlawful deportations at the origin state's request—entail exploitation of the host country's institutions. These detentions and deportations account for roughly two-thirds of the catalogued cases.[3] Most renditions also involve working closely with host country authorities to illegally transfer people to the origin country. In this way, transnational repression directly undermines the rule of law in the targeted host country. Preventing it will require building resilience through stronger relationships between host governments and exile communities, better legal protections for migrants, and greater awareness of the ways in which authoritarian regimes can manipulate host country institutions.
- **The consequences for transnational repression are currently insufficient to deter further abuse.** Aside from damage to its image, the Saudi state has faced few concrete repercussions for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The international community has not sanctioned or even soundly condemned Turkey's government for its global campaign of renditions. Multiple assassinations tied to Russian intelligence agents in Europe have not resulted in serious changes in Moscow's international relations. Only recently have governments begun to push back against Beijing's global campaign of intimidation against the Chinese diaspora. Stopping transnational repression will require reestablishing an international norm of universal due process and against extraterritorial violence.
- **The full spectrum of transnational repression tactics are significant.** Online harassment, coercion by proxy, mobility controls, and use of spyware do not garner the same level of attention as assassinations, but these less visible forms of transnational repression are intimately connected to physical attacks. Of 31 states that engage in the physical methods, at least 26 also use nonphysical, "everyday" tools of transnational repression. Any effective response to the broader phenomenon must include efforts to protect people from these practices, including targeted sanctions for spyware attacks, regulation of the commercial spyware market, and support for digital security measures among at-risk groups.



The combination of these three components determines "the likelihood of a regime's use of counter-exile measures." Adapted from *The Frontier of Loyalty* by Yossi Shain.

Freedom House has chronicled 14 consecutive years of global authoritarian resurgence and democratic erosion.[4] This report points to another way in which the two trends are intertwined. Transnational repression not only reinforces authoritarian rule in the origin countries, but also breaks down basic democratic protections in the victims' host countries.

A growing threat

It is not new for states to pursue their political opponents across borders. The Soviet Union's 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico is a classic example of transnational repression in the modern era. Libyan leader Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi's international pursuit of "stray dogs," as he referred to dissidents, spread fear among the exile community throughout his rule.[5] But the risk of transnational repression has accelerated in the 21st century due to technological changes, cooperation between states against migrants, and erosion of international norms against extraterritorial violence.

Transnational repression emerges from three factors that Yossi Shain identified in his 1989 book *The Frontier of Loyalty*:

- a regime's perception of the **threat** posed by exiles,
- a regime's available **capacity** for suppression, and
- a regime's **cost-benefit calculations** for using such coercive methods.[6]

The risk of transnational repression has grown across all three of these factors.

First, the globalization of activism due to migration and digital communications has **increased regimes' perception of the threat** that exiles pose. As widespread migration, remittances, and investment have embedded more countries in global networks, regimes face an "illiberal paradox": they depend on an international order with relatively open flows of people, information, and capital, but they are also threatened by that openness.[7] Digital technologies enable activists and journalists to participate in their country's civic life from afar,

almost in real time. Individuals may exit a state's territory and continue to have a voice within it. More than ever before, people forced to flee abroad can engage in public debates through social media, run media outlets, campaign for human rights, and support dissident movements in the origin country.[8] But for regimes in which there is no distinction between the state and the rule of a single leader or party, such participation is something that must be contained or controlled.

> In 58 percent of the cases Freedom House catalogued, the origin state accused the targeted individual of terrorism.

At the same time, **regimes' capacity for transnational repression has also grown**. The very digital technologies that enable cross-border communication also present opportunities for interference by an authoritarian regime. States use spyware, social media monitoring, and online harassment to disrupt and surveil exiles' networks from thousands of miles away. The decreasing cost of these tools, and their availability both as software and as services sold in a largely unregulated international marketplace, means that any government willing to pay can acquire them.[9] Expert analysis of the commercial surveillance market shows hundreds of companies selling a variety of tools around the world, with minimal oversight and no transparency.[10] Spyware can also lead to more severe attacks. In her report on the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, UN special rapporteur Agnès Callamard described evidence linking spyware to the killing.[11]

Even without special commercial software, social media platforms make digital intimidation and smear campaigns against exiles relatively simple. Particularly when combined with threats or actual violence against family members still in the origin country, these tools can be highly effective in convincing exiles to lower their profiles, sever their networks, or withdraw from activism altogether.[12] The leader of Russia's Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, put it succinctly in remarks on state television that he directed at the Chechen diaspora in 2016: "This modern age and technology allow us to know everything, and we can find any of you."[13]

Perpetrator states also benefit from a changing global order in which security measures are increasingly used to control migration, travel, and asylum-seeking,[14] and in which regional and international organizations, as well as co-opted national institutions, provide low-cost ways to target exiles. Asylum seekers and even recognized refugees in countries like Thailand and Turkey face backlogs that force them to wait—often for years—for rulings or resettlement to third countries. During this time, they are effectively confined in a territory where their origin state may still have considerable access to them, resulting in attacks, renditions, and even assassinations. For example, in March 2015, Tajik opposition leader Umarali Kuvvatov fled to Turkey and registered as an asylum seeker, but he was shot and killed on an Istanbul street before his case could be heard.

Policies in democracies that are hostile to asylum requests, or even to forms of legal migration, make it easier for pursuing states to have their political opponents detained and returned. For instance, they can use false allegations to trigger detention or deportation by the host country's institutions, which are primed to accelerate such procedures. In the United States, Russian national Alexey Kharis spent 15 months in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention after being arrested on the basis of an Interpol notice.[15]

Such Interpol abuse is, in fact, disturbingly common. In the last two decades, numerous governments have learned that "red notices" and other notifications provide a cheap and easy means of reaching exiles. Contrary to popular belief, Interpol is not an international police agency, nor does it have a judicial function to determine the veracity of notices before they enter the system. It simply allows member states to share notifications about wanted criminals or missing persons with one another. Technological changes since 2002 have made it much easier to upload notifications, resulting in an exponential increase that has far outstripped the organization's capacity to provide even minimal vetting. By uploading spurious notices into the system, regimes can have exiles detained or deported, sometimes even if they are already recognized as refugees.[16] The system can also be used to falsely report passports as lost or stolen, preventing exiles from traveling or causing them to be detained when they do. Despite years of civil society advocacy on the topic, and some improvements to the vetting process, Interpol abuse remains a widespread problem. At least 12 states abused Interpol notices specifically to detain exiles during the time period examined in this report.

Regional organizations built around authoritarian norms of regime protection, especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), have expanded their collective efforts against exiles. This allows regimes to extend their reach into neighbors' territory in exchange for reciprocal assistance.[17] Regional cooperation against exiles creates a sprawling web of control, forcing people either to flee further afield or to silence themselves.

Bilateral pressure is also a key tool. Beijing has gradually strangled the ability of Tibetans to flee through Nepal by implementing mobility controls, arranging repatriations, and generally building an infrastructure of mutual legal cooperation. Other countries that lack regional cooperation mechanisms but are willing to make ad hoc arrangements can often achieve similar results, as with the dozens of renditions to Turkey in cooperation with local politicians and security services in Ukraine, the Balkans, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Finally, **the normative cost of using transnational repression has gone down**, particularly due to the erosion of norms against states using extraterritorial violence in the absence of war. Looming over the issue of transnational repression are the US government's renditions and targeted killings as part of the "global war on terror" that followed the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and the Israeli government's extensive use of targeted killings outside its territory.[18] All over the world, states engaged in transnational repression apply the label of terrorism to exiles whom they pursue, in some cases overtly citing the examples of the United States and Israel.[19] In 58 percent of the cases Freedom House catalogued, the origin state accused the targeted individual of terrorism.[20] The "war on terror" has embedded in the global lexicon a flexible and arbitrary vocabulary that many states use to place certain people beyond the protections of law. Muslims are especially vulnerable: 78 percent of the cases Freedom House identified appear to have involved people of Muslim origin, reflecting the high proportion of Muslim-majority states engaged in transnational repression, the persecution of Muslim minorities in countries like China, and the vulnerability of Muslims in migration at a time of global fears about Islamist terrorism.[21]

Meanwhile, the shifting international balance of power has encouraged states to take greater risks, as democracies and international bodies focused on human rights lose the political will to push back against egregious violations. The erosion of norms is reflected in the lack of accountability for transnational repression. Even when a case is as flagrant as it could possibly be—as with the horrifying and well-documented murder and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul—leading democracies have failed to enforce accountability. Economic sanctions and visa bans against Russian entities and individuals for a series of assassinations on European soil have not deterred the Russian regime from continuing to kill abroad. In effect, states can now threaten, kidnap, or murder exiles with little fear of punishment. As Hatice Cengiz, the fiancée of Jamal Khashoggi, testified at a US congressional hearing, "If Jamal's murder passes with impunity, then me speaking here today puts me in danger."[22] Despite her plea, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia received "protection" from President Donald Trump for Khashoggi's killing.[23]

Muslims are especially vulnerable: 78 percent of the cases Freedom House identified appear to have involved people of Muslim origin.

Transnational repression and authoritarian influence

The risk of transnational repression has grown as authoritarian states have transnationalized their influence, or "gone global," more generally.[24] The wave of democratization around the world that coincided with the end of the Cold War has been partially reversed over the past decade and a half.[25] Liberal democracies have stumbled, and authoritarian states that were initially stunned by the collapse of the Soviet Union have grown more confident in applying their preferred measures to ensure regime security, first domestically and then internationally. These governments have learned to assert influence abroad in ways that circumvent or disregard legal mechanisms, but do not rise to the level of open conflict with the targeted host country. Such tactics include media and disinformation campaigns, the co-optation and corruption of host country officials and elites, building alliances with antiliberal parties and movements, and sponsoring cyberattacks.[26]

Different terms have been used to describe these practices, including "sharp power," "dark power," and "malign influence."[27] The important underlying feature is that unlike "soft power"

efforts, they do not seek to win influence through the powers of attraction, but instead aim to divide, subvert, co-opt, and coerce. If sharp power indicates measures that "pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environment in the targeted countries,"[28] transnational repression refers to those that do so specifically by silencing people in such countries—the sharpest weapons in the sharp power arsenal, as it were. And while the immediate targets may be diaspora and exile populations, the host countries should understand that transnational repression also has an effect on their societies at large. Authoritarianism, rather than being a mode of governance confined to a specific sovereign jurisdiction, is a set of practices that can be expanded, copied, and exported,[29] and transnational repression is one of its means of reproduction abroad.

> "They kill you even if they don't kill your body. They kill your spirit."
> –Rwandan exile residing in Europe

Why it matters

Transnational repression is worthy of attention first and foremost because of its impact on the rights of its victims. Journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, or just regular members of a diaspora are forced into silence. Those who dare to continue with their work face painful choices: to separate themselves from their families back home, to be ostracized from their communities, to risk life and livelihood, or simply to bear the constant stress and trauma of living under threat. Acts of extreme violence like assassinations or renditions have ripple effects across a community, but constant digital intimidation and coercion by proxy also wear down their intended targets. Exiles with whom Freedom House spoke for this report described intense feelings of depression and exhaustion. As an Iranian activist said, "They drain you emotionally, financially, in every way."[30]

Exiles described separating themselves from others in their community, avoiding even casual interactions like getting coffee, and moving to different cities to be farther away from fellow members of the diaspora. They also often struggle to maintain contact with their family members in the origin country, knowing that any communication could put such relatives at risk of imprisonment or worse. In light of the consequences for those who are most active, even those who are not directly targeted sometimes decide to remain silent. A Rwandan exile told Freedom House, "They kill you even if they don't kill your body. They kill your spirit."[31]

What these exiles describe is a violation of their fundamental human rights. Regardless of their citizenship status in a host country, they are entitled by virtue of their humanity to speak, to assemble, and to associate freely. Transnational repression degrades those rights, stunting diaspora engagement not only in the civic life of their origin country, but also in that of their country of residence.[32]

Moreover, transnational repression is a threat to the rule of law in states that host diasporas and exiles. Most of the relevant tactics involve overt legal violations, and often the corruption of host country institutions—whether through literal financial bribery of specific officials or through other extralegal inducements to breach domestic and international law. All of these practices subordinate legal order and the rights of individuals to transactions between governments and officials. The growth of transnational repression should be understood as a menace to the democratic aspirations of host countries as well as to the exiles and diasporas themselves.

This report lays out in detail what transnational repression is and how it works, with six case studies of specific states that conduct transnational repression campaigns: China, Iran, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. It also provides snapshots of how such campaigns have unfolded in different regions, and offers recommendations to policymakers on how to hold perpetrators accountable and increase democratic resilience.

Methods of Transnational Repression

A Palestinian border officer inspects the passport of a traveler returning from Egypt at the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. Image credit: Abid Katib/Getty Images.

Although every country's use of transnational repression is distinct, there are shared features across incidents that make them comparable. We divide transnational repression tactics into four categories:

1. **Direct attacks** are those in which an origin state carries out a targeted physical attack against an individual abroad. This category includes assassinations, assaults, disappearances, physical intimidation, and violent forced renditions.
2. **Co-opting other countries** describes attacks that involve manipulating other countries to act against a target through detention, unlawful deportation, and other types of forced renditions, which are authorized through pro forma but meaningless legal procedures. Interpol abuse is also a form of co-optation, in which origin countries instrumentalize Interpol's notification mechanisms in order to manipulate a host country.
3. **Mobility controls** covers tactics like passport cancellation and denial of consular services, preventing the target from traveling or causing them to be detained. Origin states also then use other forms of transnational repression, especially illegal deportation or forced rendition, against the detained individual.
4. **Threats from a distance** covers tactics that the origin state can carry out without physically acting beyond its own jurisdiction. These include online intimidation or surveillance and coercion by proxy, in which a person's family, loved one, or business partner is threatened, imprisoned, or otherwise targeted. These tactics are extremely common because of their ease for the origin state and degree to which they can affect the target. They are so ubiquitous Freedom House and others have sometimes called them "everyday" transnational repression.

Direct attacks

Direct attacks are the most visible examples of transnational repression. Assassinations, assaults, disappearances, and violent forced renditions silence the target through physical compulsion. Although these extreme tactics may seem rare, in fact they are quite widespread. Freedom House identified 26 transnational assassinations or assassination attempts since 2014, linked to 12 origin states in Asia, Eurasia, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. And 26 origin states around the world have committed renditions in the last six years, returning more than 160 people illegally with no due process or only the barest fig leaf.

Freedom House identified 26 transnational assassinations or assassination attempts since 2014, linked to 12 origin states in Asia, Eurasia, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America.

The effect of direct attacks reaches far beyond the silencing of the individual killed, assaulted, or kidnapped. As a human rights defender from Chechnya told Freedom House, "I already understand any day could be my last. I know very well what they did and who they are."[33] The ability to physically reach an individual sends a message to others abroad that they could be targeted as well.

Regimes that engage in transnational repression are aware of this ripple effect. Some leaders are willing to walk right up to the line of claiming credit for assassinations. For instance, following the murder of Rwanda's former interior minister Seth Sendashonga in Kenya in 1998, Rwandan president Paul Kagame said, "I don't have much to say about that, but I'm not going to offer any apologies."[34] States openly use renditions, on the other hand, to display their power and to warn others abroad against engaging in opposition activities. Forced confessions and "perp walks" are regular events in origin countries that conduct renditions, acting as a warning to others, a tool to humiliate the victim, and a validator for the country's security apparatus. For example, Turkey's state media has repeatedly celebrated the intelligence services for abducting members of the Gülen movement from abroad since 2016, and ministers in the government have spoken about it on the floor of the parliament.[35] Following each of several renditions of Iranian exiles abroad in the last year, Iranian media has proclaimed them successful intelligence activities.[36]

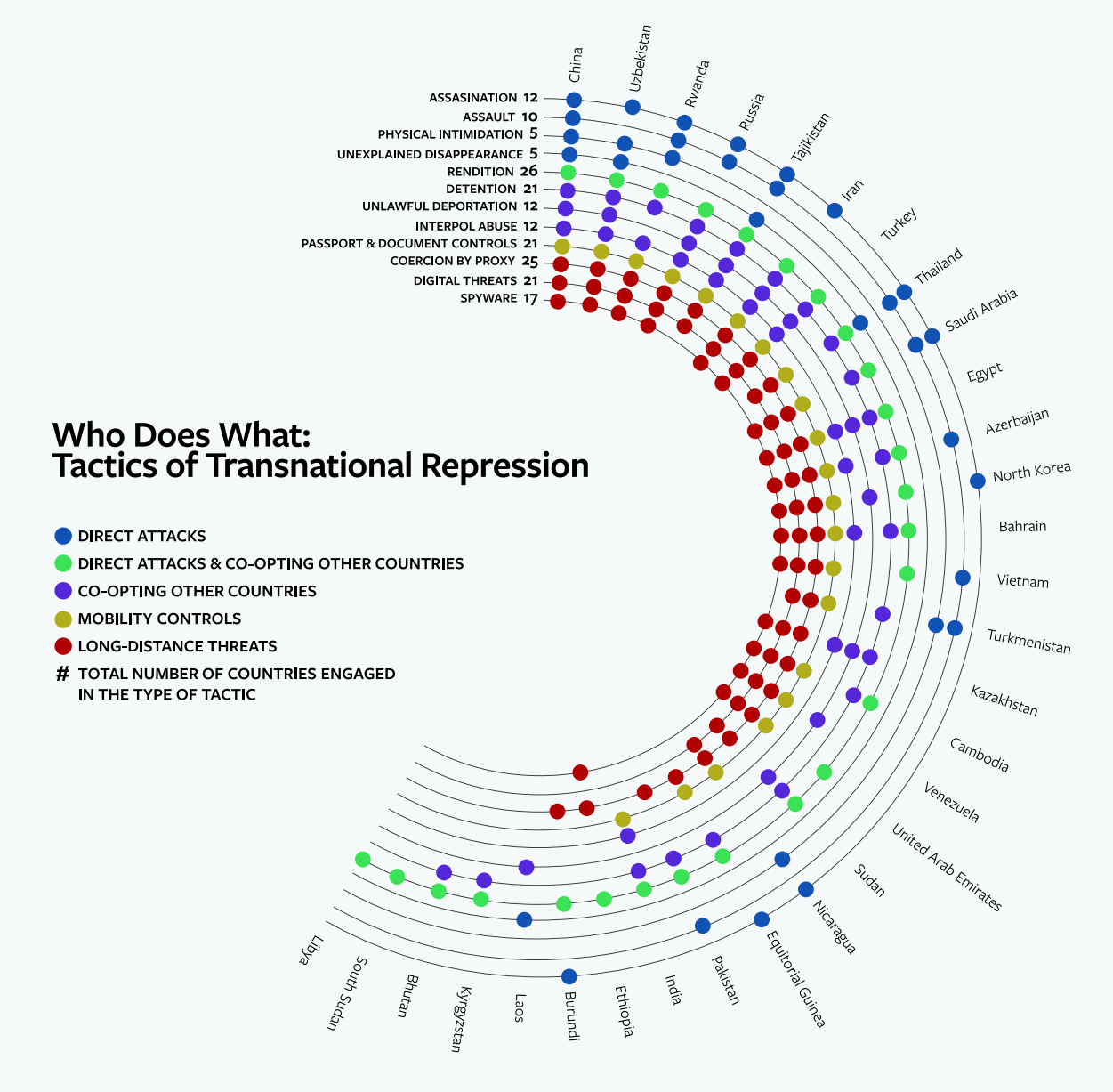
Just as the effect of direct attacks is much larger than the effect on the direct target, so is the effort behind it. Assassinations, assaults, and renditions are the highly visible outcomes of complex and coordinated diplomatic, coercive, and espionage activities against exiles.

Co-opting other countries

A significant part of the transnational repression toolkit hinges on co-opting other countries' institutions to detain, deport, or render individuals. A request for extradition or the submission of purported "national security information" in an asylum case that results in detention creates opportunities to have the target eventually returned to the country. Even when detentions do not lead to the individual's return, they disrupt the target's life, create stress and trauma, impose severe financial penalties from lost work and legal fees, and intimidate the target's network. Such "legal" mechanisms for detention often operate in coordination with other forms of back channel pressure on the host country to deport the individual. Detentions and unlawful deportations account for 62 percent of all cases compiled for this report.

Many renditions also fall into a gray area between a direct attack and co-optation. Whereas some renditions are archetypal kidnappings without the involvement of the host country, co-optation renditions involve a "fig leaf" of legal process, such as the revocation of a residence permit or a pro forma court hearing that deems the individual a national security threat to the host country. For instance, Turkey's rendition program since 2016 has mostly consisted of incidents in which local police or intelligence agencies suddenly detain exiles on a pretext, hold them incommunicado or with restricted access to counsel, and then quickly hand them over to Turkish intelligence agents who fly them back to Turkey. There may be some of the proceedings of a deportation, but the lack of due process and the short time span indicate these are meaningless.

Often, countries that successfully achieve illegal renditions will highlight international cooperation as a legitimizing measure. For instance, after the rendition of Rwandan political activist Paul Rusesabagina from Dubai by Rwanda's



This chart includes only origin states that engage in physical transnational repression. Tactic refers to incident targeting origin state's nationals abroad.

government, authorities announced that they had achieved his return through "an international arrest warrant," only for the authorities in the United Arab Emirates to deny that they had cooperated in the return.[37] In a separate effort, Chinese authorities broadcast a television show about their successes working with other countries to bring accused individuals back from abroad as part of its transnational anticorruption drive.

The international police notification system Interpol deserves special attention as a tool of co-optation because of its relative accessibility, and because it can be poorly understood even among the immigration and law enforcement bodies that use it. Contrary to its popular image, Interpol is an intergovernmental organization that helps police departments worldwide cooperate with each other to combat transnational crime; it does not carry out its own operations or issue its own arrest warrants.[38] The organization's limited functions include allowing member states to request a "Red Notice" that law enforcement agencies in another state extradite a wanted person; to share alerts about missing

people; and to provide warnings about potential transnational crimes, among other functions. Interpol has limited capability to vet these notices before they are disseminated, however, and the vetting processes themselves are opaque. Where the notifying country's judiciary and prosecution is subservient to political control, notices can and have been abused to pursue individuals on a political basis.[39] At least 12 of the countries using physical transnational repression have successfully abused Interpol notices against their nationals since 2014, although the lack of transparency at Interpol makes it difficult to assess the scale of abuse. Even more countries have abused Interpol to reach non-nationals.

> Of 31 countries that use physical transnational repression at least 21 also employ mobility controls against exiles.

Recent advancements in technology have enabled states to upload thousands or tens of thousands of requests without a concurrent growth in Interpol's capacity to vet them before they are disseminated. The number of requests has skyrocketed: in 2019, Interpol issued 13,377 Red Notices, compared to just over 1,277 in 2002.[40] Russia alone is responsible for a staggering 38 percent of all public Red Notices in the world.[41]

Unfortunately, the result has been widespread abuse of Interpol's systems to detain and harass individuals abroad. Even in the United States, where the legal standard that Interpol notifications do not equal arrest warrants should be clear, there have been significant failings. For instance, Russian asylum seeker Gregory Duralev spent nearly 18 months in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention in 2018–19 based on an Interpol Red Notice from Russia.[42] Moreover, some states have begun to bypass vetting entirely, by "diffusing" requests among member states without submitting them to Interpol's central office.[43] Notices and diffusions both have a tendency to linger in national systems, and as a result individuals subject to them can encounter difficulties crossing borders, opening bank accounts, or interacting with law enforcement agents.[44]

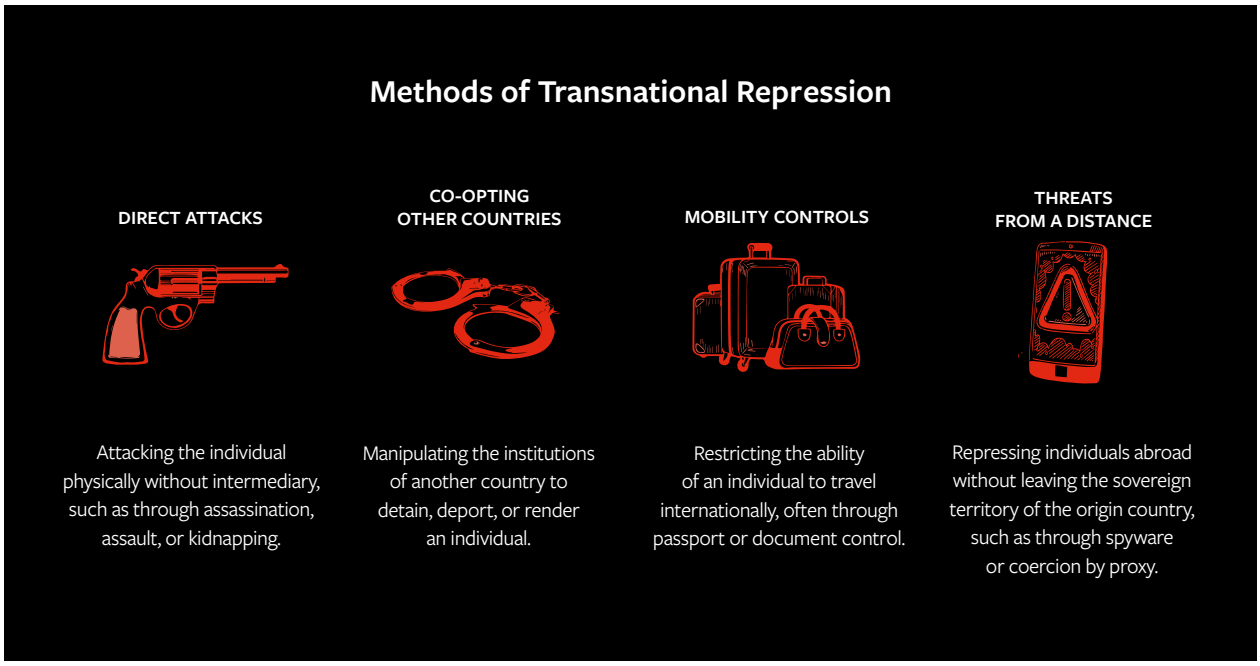
Due to high-profile cases of misuse and the long-term engagement of civil society, Interpol has improved some of its procedures and allocated more resources to vetting notices.[45] In several public cases in recent years, Interpol has declined to disseminate notices that are politically motivated, or has voided notices that had were inappropriately placed on refugees. However, as authoritarian states become more savvy about the tools of transnational repression at their disposal, international cooperation becomes more complex and requires higher levels of investment to avoid manipulation.

Controlling mobility

Mobility controls are those in which the origin country leverages its power over government-issued documents—typically passports—to coerce or control its citizens. These controls cut to the international nature of transnational repression: they can simultaneously intimidate and pressure targets, restrict diaspora mobilization, and create opportunities to route transnational repression through other countries. Of the 31 countries that use physical transnational repression, at least 21 also employ mobility controls against exiles.

Passport revocation is the simplest form of controlling mobility. With minimal resources and little to no reliance on external factors, a government can trap an individual in a known location. This tactic reduces opportunity for the target while creating new avenues of repression for the government. As transnational activism scholar Dana Moss writes, "Diaspora activists help those under siege to overcome their isolation, inform the global public about events that remain heavily repressed and censored, and provide an alternative to the regime's monopoly over information."[46] The inability to travel creates practical limitations on diaspora activism by preventing exiles from traveling to events or other opportunities to mobilize and engage in advocacy. Locked in a specific location, an exile may also be more vulnerable to physical forms of transnational repression.

A second mode of controlling mobility is reporting passports as lost or stolen in order to achieve the detention of individuals while they are in transit. Syrian journalist and activist Zaina Erhaim, who resided in Turkey at the time, was caught in this situation when she travelled to the United Kingdom in 2016. British authorities detained and questioned her for over an hour, and confiscated her passport, apparently acting on a notice from the Syrian government that the passport had been stolen.[47] By presenting a flagged document at a border crossing,



Although every country's use of transnational repression is distinct, there are shared features across incidents that make them comparable.

Erhaim's movement automatically triggered the involvement of the UK authorities. In other words, by exercising a bureaucratic lever of transnational repression, Assad's authoritarian regime was able to co-opt UK institutions. "I think this is the most scary thing: if I was caught in Emirates or in Jordan, I would have been deported back to Damascus, which means me certainly being killed under torture because I am wanted [by] the regime," Erhaim told Freedom House.

The final category of mobility control involves denial of consular services, including issuing or renewing passports or other important government documentation. In contrast to passport cancellation or reporting, the express goal of this method is to coerce an individual into returning to the home country in order to acquire the necessary documentation. This sets up an incredibly difficult choice: return to the home country and potentially face imprisonment or worse, or face losing documentation that grants the ability to travel, gain legal residency, and seek employment. Faced with this choice, threatened exiles sometimes resort to extreme measures, crossing borders unofficially or obtaining false documents in order to reach safer countries where they can apply for asylum.

Mobility controls are a low-cost option for host countries, as they already have autonomy over their nationals' documents. Except for in cases of in-transit detention, there are few opportunities for intervention on behalf of the target. And even then, as Erhaim's detention in the United Kingdom shows, strong democracies may not be equipped to recognize mobility controls for the form of transnational repression that they are. As border controls grow increasingly securitized globally, the effect of mobility controls also grows.

Threats from a distance

The targeting of an exile's loved ones who remain in the home country, and digital harassment and attacks, are very common forms of transnational repression. These threats from a distance are so widespread that measuring them is practically impossible, which is why they were not coded for this report. In this remote form, the normative cost of transnational repression is low, as threats from a distance do not require breaching the sovereignty of the host country. However, they are disproportionately high-benefit for the perpetrating country: having one's private life exposed after a malware attack, or learning that a family member was threatened, can prompt a person to scale back or halt rights activism or other undesired behavior immediately.

"Many people took advantage of my mother, [using her] to force me to comply with their wishes," exiled Vietnamese blogger Bùi Thanh Hiếu, alias Người Buôn Gió, wrote in a

Facebook post explaining his decision to stop blogging.[48] Harassment, threats, or physical actions against loved ones in the exile's home country—collectively known as coercion by proxy—is understandably a potent tool.[49] All but six of the states that engage in physical transnational repression are known to use this tactic. An upcoming paper based on over 200 original interviews with diaspora activists from across the Middle East found that the most common response to coercion by proxy was self-censorship.[50] Contributing to its prevalence, coercion by proxy does not require extraordinary capacity on the part of the state as required by forms of transnational repression that reach across borders. Most of the states that engage in transnational repression already arbitrarily target real and perceived dissidents within their borders, harassing those who speak out, holding prisoners of conscience, and even disappearing opponents.

> Coercion by proxy does not require extraordinary capacity on the part of the state.

Like coercion by proxy, minimal additional resources are needed to deploy online threats, harassment, disinformation, and smear campaigns. Having an active, critical voice is nearly impossible without an online presence. And, as digital surveillance scholar Marcus Michaelsen writes, "As much as social media help diaspora activists to circulate alternative information and opinion, these platforms can also turn into a toxic environment for abuse and threats." Women face particularly noxious rhetoric, steeped in misogyny and often including threats of violence.[51]

Deploying malware may not yet be as simple as coercion by proxy and digital harassment, but commercially available options—including those developed by Italy-based Hacking Team, Israel-based NSO Group, an NSO affiliate called Q Cyber Technologies, and DarkMatter, an Emeriti company[52]—make it a possibility for more governments than ever before. As the research group Citizen Lab and others frequently expose through technical reports, dozens of countries have been found to engage in spyware campaigns domestically, and many of those countries deploy the same tools outside their national borders.[53] A recent investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and *The Guardian* found states hiring private companies to track cell phones internationally by accessing obscure phone operators in places like the Channel Islands.[54] Freedom House found that at least 17 countries engaged in physical transnational repression also use spyware abroad.

Governments may even be able to gain backdoor access to social media platforms—as when Saudi Arabia paid a Saudi engineer working for Twitter to provide information on dissidents' accounts that would allow them to be physically located.[55] China maintains a unique capability in this sphere because of the dependence of the Chinese diaspora on WeChat, a messaging, transactions, and social media platform over which the Chinese Communist Party exercises control.[56]

The covert nature of spyware and other forms of digital surveillance allow the origin states to bide their time, collecting intelligence and unravelling dissident networks, all while furnishing authorities with the insight needed to further escalate campaigns of transnational repression.

CASE STUDIES

China

Demonstrators in Istanbul protest China's mass internment of Uighurs and other Muslims held in "reeducation" camps. Image credit: Ozan Kose/AFP via Getty Images

China conducts the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world. Efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to pressure and control the overseas population of Chinese and members of minority communities are marked by three distinctive characteristics. First, the campaign targets many groups, including multiple ethnic and religious minorities, political dissidents, human rights activists, journalists, and former insiders accused of corruption. Second, it spans the full spectrum of tactics: from direct attacks like renditions, to co-opting other countries to detain and render exiles, to mobility controls, to threats from a distance like digital threats, spyware, and coercion by proxy. Third, the sheer breadth and global scale of the campaign is unparalleled. Freedom House's conservative catalogue of direct, physical attacks since 2014 covers 214 cases originating from China, far more than any other country.

These egregious and high-profile cases are only the tip of the iceberg of a much broader system of surveillance, harassment, and intimidation that leaves many overseas Chinese and exile minorities feeling that the CCP is watching them and constraining their ability to exercise basic rights even when living in a foreign democracy. All told, these tactics affect millions of Chinese and minority populations from China in at least 36 host countries across every inhabited continent.[57]

The extensive scope of China's transnational repression is a result of a broad and ever-expanding definition of who

should be subject to extraterritorial control by the Chinese Communist Party.

- First, the CCP targets entire ethnic and religious groups, including Uighurs, Tibetans, and Falun Gong practitioners, which together number in the hundreds of thousands globally. Over the past year alone, the list of targeted populations has expanded to also include Inner Mongolians and Hong Kongers residing outside the People's Republic of China (PRC).

> These tactics affect millions of Chinese and minority populations from China in at least 36 host countries across every inhabited continent.

- Second, China's anticorruption drive has taken a broad, global view, targeting what may be thousands of its own former officials living abroad, now designated as alleged embezzlers.
- Third, China's overt transnational repression activities are embedded in a broader framework of influence that encompasses cultural associations, diaspora groups, and in some cases, organized crime networks, which places it in contact with a huge population of Chinese citizens, Chinese diaspora members, and minority populations from China who reside around the world.
- Fourth, China deploys its technological prowess as part of its transnational repression toolbox via sophisticated hacking and phishing attacks. One of China's newest avenues for deploying repressive tactics overseas has been via the WeChat platform, a messaging, social media, and financial services app that is ubiquitous among Chinese users around the world, and through which the party-state can monitor and control discussion among the diaspora.
- Fifth, China's geopolitical weight allows it to assert unparalleled influence over countries both near (Nepal, Thailand) and far (Egypt, Kenya). This produces leverage that the CCP does not hesitate to use against targets around the world.
- Finally, China asserts control over non-Chinese citizens overseas, including ethnic Chinese, Taiwanese, or other foreigners, who are critical of CCP influence and human rights abuses. While not the focus of this report, China's attempts to intimidate and control foreigners in response to their peaceful advocacy activities is an ominous trend.

Due to China's growing power internationally, its technical capacity, and its aggressive claims regarding Chinese citizens and noncitizens overseas, its campaign has a significant effect on the rights and freedoms of overseas Chinese and minority communities in exile in dozens of countries. Additionally, the CCP's use of transnational repression poses a long-term threat to rule of law systems in other countries. This is because Beijing's influence is powerful enough to not only violate the rule of law in an individual case, but also to reshape legal systems and international norms to its interests.

A multi-faceted transnational repression bureaucracy

The parts of the Chinese party-state apparatus involved in transnational repression are as diverse as the targets and tactics of the campaign. The importance of extending the party's grip on overseas Chinese and ethnic minority exiles originates with the highest echelons of the CCP. Besides CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's own advancement of sweeping anticorruption campaigns, leaked speeches from other members of the Politburo high up in the security apparatus are explicit about the priority that should be given to the "overseas struggle" against perceived party enemies. These name specific tactics or goals, like co-opting allies in foreign countries to assist in the effort, using diplomatic channels and relevant laws in host countries, and preventing protests during overseas visits of top party officials.[58]

The harshest forms of direct transnational repression from Chinese agents—espionage, cyberattacks, threats, and physical assaults—emerge primarily from the CCP's domestic security and military apparatus: agencies like the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), although the precise division of labor among these entities is often unclear. Persecution of Uighurs, Tibetans, and political dissidents is typically managed by the MSS,[59] but MPS is often involved in threats against family members within China, or cases where regional authorities call exiles to threaten them from within China. Anti-Falun Gong activities are led by the 6-10 Office, an extralegal security agency tasked with suppressing banned religious groups,[60] and the MPS, but local officials from various regions are also involved in monitoring Falun Gong exiles from their provinces. Hackers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) run spyware campaigns from within China.[61]

Other forms of transnational repression that involve working through the legal and political systems of foreign countries—including detentions and extraditions—or that involve diplomatic staff at embassies and consulates, run through agencies like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. China has proven particularly adept at using its geopolitical and economic clout to provoke foreign governments in countries as diverse as India,[62] Thailand, Serbia,[63] Malaysia,[64] Egypt,[65] Kazakhstan,[66] the United Arab Emirates,[67] Turkey,[68] and Nepal[69] to use their own security forces to detain—and in some cases deport to China—CCP critics, members of targeted ethnic or religious minorities, and refugees. "Anticorruption" activities that target CCP members are coordinated by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).

Beyond the direct agencies of the party-state, a network of proxy entities—like "anti-cult" associations in the United States, Chinese student groups in Canada,[70] and pro-Beijing activists with organized crime links in Taiwan[71]—have been involved in harassment and even physical attacks against party critics and religious or ethnic minority members. The greater distance from official Chinese government agencies offers the regime plausible deniability on the one hand, while accomplishing the goal of sowing fear and encouraging self-censorship far from China's shores, on the other.

These actors taken as a whole are best understood as part of the united front system, "a network of [Chinese Communist] party and state agencies responsible for influencing groups outside the party, particularly those claiming to represent civil society," as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) describes it.[72] United front work is an important part of how the party rules China, "cultivating, co-opting, and coercing nonparty elites" using economic carrots and sticks, according to China analyst Matt Schrader.[73] United front work *outside* of China—partly coordinated by the CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD)—includes regional diaspora associations, student groups, and scholarly bodies that officially represent specific regions of China abroad. This work has been growing in importance for the CCP, as shown in the restructuring of the UFWD, including its work on the Chinese diaspora, in the last three years.[74] While some of these activities may be legal public diplomacy, united front work binds them with espionage and transnational repression. When US authorities arrested a Tibetan New York Police Department officer for spying on the Tibetan community in September 2020, one of his handlers was identified as a Chinese consular employee working for the UFWD.[75]

An escalating campaign

China's use of transnational repression is not new. Uighurs, Tibetans, and Falun Gong practitioners, as well as political dissidents, have long faced systematic reprisals outside the country.[76] The campaign has escalated considerably since 2014, however, and new target groups have been added in an international extension of emergent repressive campaigns within the PRC. The concentration of power under CCP general secretary Xi Jinping and his emphasis on an assertive foreign policy has led to an ever-more aggressive stance in Chinese foreign policy, which includes transnational repression. A series of new PRC laws passed under Xi have codified the extraterritorial reach of CCP controls, such as the National Intelligence Law, the Hong Kong National Security Law, and the draft Data Security Law.[77]

> The harshest forms of direct transnational repression from Chinese agents—espionage, cyberattacks, threats, and physical assaults—emerge primarily from the CCP's domestic security and military apparatus.

A significant step in this process was the CCP's increasing effort to control **the Uighur community**, including by claiming broad jurisdiction over Uighurs abroad. In 2014, Xi Jinping ordered the CCP to escalate its efforts against alleged "terrorism, infiltration, and separatism" in the Uighur-plurality region of Xinjiang. In 2016, Chinese authorities began to round up Uighurs and other Muslims in the region for "re-education" camps. At the same time, the authorities also clamped down upon mobility, collecting the passports of Uighurs across the region and preventing their exit. In early 2017, Uighurs around the world with Chinese citizenship began to be told to return to China; those who did often joined the over a million Uighurs housed in the camps.[78] Those who did not return, or those who fled the escalating repression inside China, were detained and in many cases rendered or unlawfully deported to China. At least 109 Uighurs were deported unlawfully from Thailand in 2015, and 13 were rendered from Egypt without due process;[79] Egypt may have unlawfully deported another 86 during this time.[80] The global persecution of Uighurs continues to this day. As

Kathmandu, Nepal - March 30: A pro-Tibetan demonstrator screams 'Free Tibet' while being forcibly detained by Nepali police during a pro-Tibetan protest outside of the Chinese consulate March 30, 2008 in Kathmandu, Nepal. Image Credit: Brian Sokol/Getty Images.

of November 2020, Saudi Arabia was detaining two Chinese Uighurs and considering their forced return to China.[81]

Uighurs who avoided coerced return were still subject to abuses. For instance, Chinese political pressure has weakened Turkish protections for the large Uighur diaspora in that country.[82] Residence permits remain difficult for Uighurs to acquire or to keep in Turkey. The US outlet National Public Radio (NPR) reported in March 2020 that between 200 and 400 Uighurs had been detained in Turkey in 2019 alone. Deportations from Turkey to China also occur despite the Uighur community's efforts. In August 2019, a Uighur woman and her two children were deported from Turkey to Tajikistan, and then promptly transferred to Chinese custody.[83] News outlets reported that five or six other Uighurs were on the flight with her.

Wherever they are, Uighurs face intense digital threats combined with family intimidation, in which their relatives in Xinjiang are used as proxies to threaten or coerce them.[84] In multiple cases, Chinese police are reported to have forced family members to call their relatives abroad on WeChat in order to warn them against engaging in human rights advocacy.[85] China has used some of its most powerful spyware tools against Uighurs, developing malware to infect iPhones via WhatsApp messages.[86] China has even hacked into telecommunications networks in Asia in order to track Uighurs. [87]

These threats create an atmosphere of fear for Uighurs abroad. In November 2020, a Uighur in Turkey, who had previously come forward as having been pressured to spy on the community, was shot in Istanbul.[88] He survived, and has accused the Chinese state of targeting him.

Tibetans overseas are also subject to sustained, systematic pressure from the CCP party-state that spans from neighboring Nepal to Europe and the United States. Only around 14,000 Tibetans reside in Nepal. But the "gentleman's agreement" that allows Tibetans who reach Nepal to travel on to the exile Central Tibetan Administration's headquarters in India made it the main conduit for Tibetans fleeing China. In recent years, this agreement has eroded under Chinese pressure. First, stricter mobility controls by China reduced the ability of Tibetans to flee the country, winnowing the number of those reaching Nepal from several thousand per year down to only 23 in 2019.[89] At the same time, Tibetans who reached Nepal have been more vulnerable to return, as happened with six individuals who crossed the border in September 2019 but were immediately handed to Chinese authorities.[90] The number of Tibetans able to flee may shrink even further. In October 2019, the Nepalese government and China signed a new agreement including a "Boundary Management System" and Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) that would expedite Nepalese handovers of Tibetans to China, either at the border or after they are inside Nepal.[91]

Like Uighurs, Tibetans around the world are subject to intimidation and espionage by Chinese agents. In September 2020, US federal authorities announced the arrest of an active New York Police Department officer of Tibetan descent who had worked with Chinese officials in the US to spy on the Tibetan community in and around New York City.[92] The case resembles recent incidents of surveillance and intimidation of Tibetans in Sweden, Switzerland, and Canada.[93] The same top-shelf spyware used against Uighurs has also been used in campaigns against Tibetans.[94]

As Chinese government efforts to suppress the culture and language of **Mongolians** in Inner Mongolia accelerated in 2020, provoking widespread protests, threats also spread to members of the ethnic group living outside China. In September 2020, a man from Inner Mongolia living in Australia on a temporary visa reported that that he had received a call from local authorities in China warning him that if he spoke out about events in the region, including on social media, then he would "be withdrawn from Australia."[95]

Practitioners of Falun Gong, a spiritual movement banned in China, also face regular reprisals from China and from Chinese agents. These include frequent harassment and occasional physical assaults by members of visiting Chinese delegations or pro-Beijing proxies at protests overseas, as in cases that have occurred since 2014 in the United States,[96] the Czech Republic,[97] Taiwan,[98] Brazil,[99] and Argentina.[100] Media and cultural initiatives associated with Falun Gong have reported suspicious break-ins targeting sensitive information, vehicle tampering, and pressure from Chinese authorities for local businesses to cut off advertising or other contractual obligations with them.[101] Multiple Falun Gong practitioners in Thailand have also faced detention, including a Taiwanese man involved in uncensored radio broadcasts to China[102] and several cases of Chinese refugees formally recognized as such by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).[103] In October 2017, a Falun Gong practitioner who had survived a Chinese labor camp and become a high-profile informant on CCP abuses—sneaking a letter into a Halloween decoration when detained and later filming a documentary with undercover footage—died of sudden kidney failure in Indonesia. Some colleagues consider his death suspicious, but no autopsy was performed.[104]

Human rights defenders, journalists, and others who criticize the CCP have come under target as well. Independent Chinese media in Australia have had advertisers and even local town councils withdraw from sponsorships under Chinese diplomatic pressure, while suffering more overt actions like the theft of newspapers.[105] Chinese journalists[106], political cartoonists,[107] activists, and the teenage son of a detained rights lawyer who have fled China have been threatened or detained in neighboring countries like Thailand[108] and Myanmar,[109] and in some cases, forcibly returned to the mainland. In July 2020, a Chinese student in Australia who runs a Twitter account critical of Xi Jinping said she had received video calls in which a Chinese police officer, speaking next to her father, warned her "to remember that you are a citizen of China."[110]

In recent years, **Hong Kong democracy advocates** have emerged as a relatively new target of transnational repression. In October 2016, prominent Hong Kong political activist Joshua Wong was detained on arrival and deported from Thailand.[111] After large-scale prodemocracy protests broke out in Hong Kong in 2019, advocates traveling to Taiwan were followed, harassed, and attacked with red paint by pro-CCP groups,[112] prompting police protection to be assigned to them.[113] A Singaporean activist was jailed for 10 days in August 2020 for "illegal assembly" because of a Skype call he convened with Joshua Wong in 2016 during a discussion event in Singapore.[114] With Beijing's imposition of a National Security Law on Hong Kong in June 2020, the net around Hong Kongers globally tightened. The law includes a provision with vast extraterritorial reach, potentially criminalizing any speech critical of the

Chinese or Hong Kong government made anywhere in the world, including speech by foreign nationals.[115] Among those who received the first round of arrest warrants under the new law was Samuel Chu, an American citizen, who was charged for his work to gain US government support for the cause of freedom in Hong Kong.[116] Chu and others like him now must not only avoid traveling to Hong Kong, but also to any country with an extradition treaty with Hong Kong or China.

Reflecting the CCP's expansive idea of who belongs within its purview, in line with the state's "One China" policy, the PRC considers **citizens of Taiwan** as its own despite lacking any actual control over Taiwan's government affairs, law or law enforcement, or its military. In April 2016, eight Taiwanese citizens were extradited to China from Kenya after being acquitted of telecommunications fraud, despite stringent protests from the Taiwanese government.[117]

> In 2018, Chinese state media claimed that 3,000 people had "returned or been repatriated" from 90 countries.

China's aggressive extraterritorial policies extend even in some cases to people of Chinese origin with other nationalities. One of the most prominent recent cases was that of Gui Minhai, a Chinese-origin bookseller who was a Swedish—and not Chinese—citizen. After Gui angered Xi Jinping with sales of books in Hong Kong containing salacious rumors about the general secretary, he was forced to flee to Thailand. In October 2015, he was kidnapped and taken to China. There he appealed in what looked by all accounts to be a forced confession to be treated as a Chinese citizen, and for Swedish authorities not to be involved in his case. In 2019, Minhai's daughter Angela Gui was warned by two China-linked businessmen to stop publicly advocating on her father's case if she ever wanted to see him again. This threat was made during a meeting in Stockholm arranged by the Swedish ambassador to China, Anna Lindstedt, who lost her job as ambassador as a result of the meeting.[118] As Yuan Yang, the deputy bureau chief of the *Financial Times* wrote, Minhai's case "makes us wonder whether the state sees itself as the governor of ethnic Chinese people wherever they may be, rather than a state constrained by international law and diplomatic protocol."[119]

"Anticorruption": Fox Hunt and Skynet

The final area of focus for China in transnational repression is its global "anticorruption" campaign. The party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) oversees this campaign, focusing on members of the CCP who are accused of corruption and may be fugitives within China, but also those who have fled abroad. The campaign has escalated since 2014, when the CCP announced a global anticorruption drive under the banner of "Fox Hunt."[120] The campaign expanded further in 2015 with the announcement of "Operation Skynet."[121] The scale of the anticorruption drive is difficult to evaluate through public sources, but in 2018, Chinese state media claimed that 3,000 people had "returned or been repatriated" from 90 countries.[122] In public remarks in August 2020, US FBI director Christopher Wray said that there were "hundreds" of targets of Fox Hunt in the United States.[123]

On the official level, the anticorruption campaign is a legal effort to hold accountable Chinese elites who have embezzled money, frequently from state enterprises, and fled abroad. The CCP makes a point of emphasizing the supposed legality and legitimacy of Fox Hunt. The campaign was announced alongside the dissemination of a list of 100 individuals China said were sought through Interpol "Red Notices." Like other countries, China uses Interpol notices to imply international endorsement of its pursuit, even though Interpol notices are not subject to any judicial review. In January 2019, Beijing's state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), aired a program titled "Red Arrest Notice" documenting 14 cases of individuals arrested and returned to China, and one found hiding in China. The show emphasized the legality of the process of repatriation from abroad, including through lengthy legal proceedings in other countries. In line with the CCP's communications, the overall message of the show was that China's anticorruption campaign is a fully legal effort accepted by other states as a matter of international cooperation.

The actual tactics underpinning the CCP's anticorruption campaign are much more unsavory. These include at a minimum surveillance, physical threats, and family intimidation in order to force exiles to return "voluntarily" to China. In October 2020, the US Department of Justice accused eight individuals of acting as illegal agents of China in a multiyear campaign of harassment and stalking in order to coerce an unnamed Chinese individual to return to face trial.[124] In 2018, US intelligence officials alleged off the

record to *Foreign Policy* that Chinese agents had beaten and drugged multiple individuals in Australia, returning them to China by boat.[125]

The anticorruption campaign is also a vehicle for the CCP to seek to change international norms to better suit its objectives and interests. Chinese officials and media present the anticorruption campaign as part of a global effort to shape anticorruption norms. This includes endorsing the 2014 "Beijing Declaration" on fighting corruption, a product of that year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), and the G20 Anti-Corruption Action Plan of 2017–18. In all of its efforts, officials highlight calls to join the UN Convention against Corruption. The CCP has also put significant diplomatic effort into building bilateral legal relationships that would enable authorities to more readily "reach" individuals who flee abroad. A 2019 analysis by the Center for Advanced China Research identified 37 countries with which China had extradition treaties, a list that notably includes European Union (EU) member states like Italy, France, and Portugal.[126] According to analysis in *The Diplomat*, from 2015–17, five EU member states extradited "economic fugitives" to China.[127] In at least one other European state—Switzerland—Chinese officials successfully entered into a secret agreement to give their security agents free reign in the territory to monitor and potentially intimidate a wide range of targets, including Fox Hunt fugitives.[128]

Despite its cultivation of an image of legality and careful references to international law, at its core the CCP's anticorruption campaign reflects its domestic context, in which the preferences of the party-state stand above all other considerations. It is useful to recall the case of Meng Hongwei. A prominent CCP official from the domestic security apparatus, Meng served as president of Interpol from 2016 until October 2018, when he was abruptly arrested in China, expelled from the party, and sentenced to prison for corruption.[129] This sequence of events should act as a reminder of how the CCP's global anticorruption drive is part and parcel of its overall strategy of shaping international norms to its advantage. As countries around the world grapple with how to manage relations with China, they should avoid assuming that "anticorruption" is neutral ground without implications for broader engagement with the Chinese Communist Party.

> In October 2020, the US Department of Justice accused eight individuals of acting as illegal agents of China in a multiyear campaign of harassment and stalking in order to coerce an unnamed Chinese individual to return to face trial.

CASE STUDIES

Rwanda

Members of the Rwandan community in Belgium demonstrate in the snow on December 4, 2010 in Brussels against the upcoming visit of Paul Kagame, the current President of the Republic of Rwanda, to Brussels. Image Credit: Nicolas Maeterlinck/AFP via Getty Images.

Rwandan transnational repression is exceptionally broad in terms of tactics, targets, and geographic reach. Rwandans abroad experience digital threats, spyware attacks, family intimidation and harassment, mobility controls, physical intimidation, assault, detention, rendition, and assassination. The government has physically targeted Rwandans in at least seven countries since 2014, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kenya, as well as farther afield in South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and Germany. Rwandans as far-flung as the United States, Canada, and Australia report intense fears of surveillance and retribution. The cases documented by Freedom House represent a small fraction of alleged incidents, but provide a useful window into the extent and methods of the Rwandan government's campaign, especially when taken into consideration alongside interviews, existing research, and the broader pattern of allegations.

The government usually targets individuals who challenge it through criticism or active resistance, or who question its version of Rwandan history. Authorities take an extremely broad view of what constitutes dissent and seek to exert control over the totality of the diaspora, including through its embassies and official diaspora organizations. Even communicating with fellow Rwandans who have run afoul of the government poses a risk. "No [Rwandan] wants to have coffee with me even though we are thousands of kilometers from the country," a Rwandan exile residing in Europe told Freedom House.[130] The commitment to controlling Rwandans abroad and the resources devoted to the effort are stunning when considering that Rwanda is a country of 13 million people[131] where roughly a third of the population lives below the poverty line.[132] The Rwandan government is among the most prolific transnational repression actors worldwide.

A long history

Transnational repression has been a feature of President Paul Kagame's regime since the early days of his rule. Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) came to power following the 1994 genocide of Tutsis and civil war, which ended with the victory of the mostly Tutsi RPF against the previous Hutu-dominated regime. The RPF's version of events, in which the RPF stopped the genocide and saved the country, has become official history, and different descriptions are criminalized as "genocide ideology" and "divisionism."[133] This has not stopped numerous critics, defectors, and journalists—as well as international human rights organizations—from alleging that the RPF facilitated, allowed, or conducted war crimes and crimes against humanity of its own during the civil war.[134] These allegations personally implicate Kagame as the leader of the RPF during the conflict, and call into question his personal mythology as a peace bringer and hero.[135]

Kagame's regime has gained an international reputation for maintaining stability and economic growth, but at least some of the regime's longevity is made possible by persistent suppression of political dissent through surveillance, intimidation, and violence. These tactics are used indiscriminately within Rwanda and are mirrored outside the country. "What I can tell you is that in justice there is no long distance. Wherever anyone who tries to destabilize the country is located, they should be aware that justice will reach you," said a spokesperson for the Rwanda Investigations Bureau, after rendering an alleged rebel leader from Comoros in 2019.[136]

Severe transnational repression dates to the early days of RPF rule and has continued throughout. Théoneste Lizinde and Augustin Bugirimfura—a former insider and a businessman, respectively—were killed in Kenya in 1996. Two years later, former interior minister Seth Sendashonga was shot to death, also in Kenya. In 2010, General Kayumba Nyamwasa, a former member of the Rwandan military, survived an assassination attempt in South Africa. A year later three Rwandan exiles in the United Kingdom faced threats against their lives, at least two of whom received direct warnings from the London police.[137] Interspersed between these high-profile incidents are numerous other disappearances, attacks, assassinations, and threats, amounting to a multidecade campaign against Rwandans abroad.

High-profile global targets

The bulk of documented Rwandan cases involve **high-profile exiles**, many of whom are former military figures or insiders from Kagame's government who have fallen out of favor, and who are often affiliated with opposition groups like the Rwanda National Congress (RNC). The government focuses on these figures in particular because they are most capable of drawing on insider knowledge to challenge the narratives about the genocide and Kagame's rise to power, upon which he bases much of his credibility, and have sufficient status to persuade Rwandans or international partners to turn on the regime.

> "Wherever anyone who tries to destabilize the country is located, they should be aware that justice will reach you."
> –spokesperson for the Rwanda Investigations Bureau

A group of former regime insiders founded the RNC in 2010.[138] The following year, four of the founding members were sentenced in absentia to 20 years in prison on charges including threatening state security. Among those sentenced were Patrick Karegeya, a former head of the intelligence service who was murdered in a Johannesburg hotel on January 1, 2014, and Lieutenant General Kayumba Nyamwasa, who was shot in 2010 after escaping to South Africa, but survived.[139] As of 2019, Nyamwasa said he has been targeted for assassination at least four times.[140] Of Karegeya's murder, the Rwandan defense minister said, "When you choose to be a dog, you die like a dog."[141]

Labeling opposition groups, like the RNC, as terrorist organizations gives the Rwandan government's persecution a veneer of legitimacy on the world stage and offers a pretext for taking action against alleged affiliates of the group. Five of the ten physical cases documented in this report's time period involve an accusation of terrorism, and it is a common feature among many other alleged physical and nonphysical cases.

Events surrounding the recent **rendition** of Paul Rusesabagina reflect the multidecade time period of Rwandan transnational repression, and illustrates key characteristics common to many high-profile cases. Rusesabagina, a Hutu, was a hotel manager at the time of the genocide who sheltered hundreds of people fleeing from the killing; the Oscar-nominated 2004 movie *Hotel Rwanda* later turned him into an international hero. By

then, however, he had already fled the country; he left in 1996 after being warned that he was in danger—a credible threat given that he had survived an assassination attempt two years previously.[142] He settled in Belgium, where he lived until 2009, when he again relocated out of fear for his safety, this time to the US.[143]

> Of Karegeya's murder, the Rwandan defense minister said, "When you choose to be a dog, you die like a dog."

From the perspective of the Rwandan government, his prominence was a threat, as was the way his account of the genocide diverged from the official narrative.[144] In exile he became a fierce critic of the government and president of the opposition coalition Rwanda Movement for Democratic Change (MRCD), and according to the government's accusations, a supporter of terrorism through the MRCD's armed wing, the National Liberation Forces.[145]

In August 2020, the Rwandan government finally caught up with Rusesabagina: he was rendered from Dubai to Kigali, where he is still being held despite an international outcry.[146] "It was actually flawless," Kagame said, alluding to the successful plot to lure Rusesabagina onto a plane. "It's like if you fed somebody with a false story that fits well in his narrative of what he wants to be and he follows it and then finds himself in a place like that."[147] His sophisticated rendition is characteristic of the planning and resources that Rwanda devotes to transnational repression, as is the charge of terrorism that awaits him in Rwandan courts.

Renditions in Central and East Africa

Beyond the internationally known cases like Karegeya and Rusesabagina, there are many less prominent and less well documented incidents, notably renditions in central and east Africa. Nevertheless, there is a common thread between these regional renditions and high-profile captures like that of Rusesabagina: they are, for the most part, true kidnappings that are executed without any show of due process. Jean Chrysostome Ntirugiribambe—a former military captain who later worked as a defense investigator for the UN tribunal investigating the genocide, and had been living in exile in Togo—traveled to Kenya to visit his family in 2015. On June 23, while shopping in Nairobi, he was forced into a car by a group of armed men and allegedly brought to Rwanda. He hasn't been heard from since.[148]

There have also been Rwandan renditions from the neighboring DRC, which appear to involve Congolese and Rwandan security officials cooperating on Congolese soil. A 2017 Human Rights Watch report documented the campaign against Rwandans in the DRC, citing interviews with 10 former detainees who were allegedly rendered illegally from the DRC to Rwanda. One interviewee estimated that they were transferred to Rwanda with approximately 17 other Rwandans.[149] Though the sweeping nature and international collaboration that characterize these renditions from the DRC are somewhat unique, the theme of terrorism and antistate actions arises ones again, as the transfers focused on alleged members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), an armed group based in eastern DRC.

Uganda is another apparent hotspot, though with less direct documentation. David Himbara, a former aide and adviser to Kagame who is now a prominent critic in exile, published an open letter to Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni listing the names of more than 50 Rwandan refugees who were kidnapped or killed in Uganda from 2008 through 2015.[150] While Freedom House was not able to verify the full list, numerous other sources also suggest a massive and underreported assault on Rwandans in Uganda.[151] There are also a handful of well-documented cases from the past two decades, such as that of Charles Ingabire, a journalist assassinated in Kampala in 2011, and Joel Mutabazi, a former bodyguard of Kagame who was kidnapped from a UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) safe house in 2013.[152] In some cases, Ugandan law enforcement appears to have cooperated with the Rwandan government. There are several reports of **unlawful detentions** of Rwandans in Uganda,[153] and in 2018 Uganda charged General Kale Kyihura, who led the country's national police, on counts that include participating in the illegal rendition of Rwandan refugees, including Mutabazi.[154]

This seemingly constant campaign of transnational repression against Rwandans in nearby countries is a widely understood problem, but is challenging to address. Not only do Rwandans in Uganda and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo lack access to the stronger reporting mechanisms and better-funded rights groups like those in Europe and North America, but the implicit threat of being in such close proximity to Rwanda, and therefore easy to access, may have a chilling effect on those who would otherwise speak out.

Nonphysical repression

Rwanda's highly visible assassinations, renditions, and assaults against its citizens abroad are coupled with a vast campaign of **nonphysical repression** including spyware attacks, digital threats and harassment, family targeting, and mobility controls.

After CitizenLab exposed the deployment of NSO Group's Pegasus **spyware** via WhatsApp, the *Financial Times* identified six Rwandans affected. Those targeted include members of the RNC; the United Democratic Forces–Inkingi, an opposition party the Rwandan government has accused of terrorism; a human rights defender; and Patrick Karegeya's nephew.[155] According to *the Times*, many of the targeted Rwandans fear that their communications helped the Rwandan government track and pursue targets. David Batenga, Karegeya's nephew, is among those who expressed such concerns:

> Mr. Batenga says he is worried about how the information stolen from his phone via Pegasus could have been used. He helped arrange a trip for a Belgium-based compatriot in August, who then vanished a few days after landing in Kampala, the Ugandan capital, despite taking precautions that included changing safe houses.[156]

Faustin Rukundo, an activist and member of the RNC who was subject to Pegasus infection, suspects the malware was involved in the plot to render Rusesabagina.[157] Perceptions of surveillance are widespread; a Rwandan human rights defender living in Uganda told Freedom House that he suspects that his phone calls are being tapped.

Spyware is not the only digital tool deployed against Rwandans. **Digital threats and harassment** through social media and public smear campaigns are common. Government affiliated and progoverment social media accounts regularly mobilize against individuals who are critical of the government, and the so-called Rwandan Twitter Army systematically harasses and discredits opponents online. Social media users who engage in attacks on behalf of the government are reportedly rewarded with access to government jobs or employment at private companies affiliated with the ruling party.[158]

Progovernment accounts also use mass reporting as a silencing tactic. David Himbara alleges that progovernment Rwandan accounts reported his Facebook posts as violating Facebook's community standards. Facebook removed his posts from the platform, before reinstating them after Himbara submitted an appeal.[159] However, pushing back on harassment campaigns can be dangerous. Rwandan intelligence services reportedly monitor and report social media users who engage constructively with government critics. [160]

A third nonphysical means that the Rwandan government uses to suppress its nationals abroad is **family intimidation and harassment**. Nearly all Rwandans Freedom House spoke with for this report expressed fear for their relations who remain in the country. One described it as "psychological torture."

In 2017, prior to the spyware infection, UK resident Faustin Rukundo was subject to family targeting when his then-pregnant wife, Violette Uwamahoro, traveled to Rwanda to attend her father's funeral. Soon after her arrival, contact with her was lost. More than two weeks after her disappearance, the Rwandan police confirmed that she was in their custody. They charged her and a distant relative with a number of offenses, including revealing state secrets. [161] Uwamahoro was eventually released on bail and able to return to the United Kingdom.

> "There is no unity anymore, we don't trust each other anymore."
> – Rwandan activist in the United States

More recently, in 2019, the two brothers of a Sydney-based Rwandan refugee and human rights defender, Noel Zihabamwe, were abducted by Rwandan police. They have been missing for over a year. Zihabamwe told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which has reported extensively on the threats facing Rwandans in Australia, that he believes his brothers' disappearance was retribution for his refusal to cooperate with the regime's demands and for reporting subsequent threats to the police. [162]

Finally, Rwanda has been known to use **mobility controls**. In February 2020, Rwanda requested that Uganda cancel the passport of Charlotte Mukankusi as a step toward diplomatic reconciliation between the two countries. Rwanda also confiscated the Australian passport of a Rwandan who returned to the country to see his family in 2019. He has been

unable to leave Rwanda for more than a year, despite consular assistance from the Australian government. [163]

Community impacts

In addition to the evidence provided by existing documentation, Freedom House interviews with Rwandans living in sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and North America shed light on a diaspora community living in intense fear of their home-country government—and in fear of each other. "They work through the embassy and through the diaspora community," one Rwandan activist told us. "There is no unity anymore, we don't trust each other anymore." [164] Lists of dissidents allegedly on Kagame's "kill list" circulate among Rwandans on social media and messaging platforms. Some Rwandans report avoiding other Rwandans, or remaining very guarded with each other.

> All Rwandans are at risk of transnational repression.

Their fear is well-founded: evidence supports the belief that the Rwandan government enlists civilians to target their acquaintances. In 2015, Major Robert Higiro testified before the US Congress that the Rwandan director of military intelligence, Colonel Dan Munyuza, requested that he kill General Kayumba Kyamwasa and Colonel Patrick Karegeya in South Africa, for a fee of $1 million. "That's the way it works in Rwanda," he testified. "They look for people they think are vulnerable or weak. If you say no, they track you down and kill you; if you agree, they will eventually kill you too. You have no options." [165] Higiro played along for a time, while gathering evidence of the plot, before eventually fleeing to Belgium. However, Rwanda apparently managed to find another acquaintance to help carry out the mission; a friend of Karageya's who ultimately persuaded him to rent the hotel room where he was killed. [166]

Similar allegations about recruitment of diaspora members were leveled by Rwandans in Australia in an extensive report by ABC.[167] The report also documents allegations that the Rwandan government furnishes spies, operatives, and loyalists with false documentation in order to gain asylum and implant themselves in Rwandan communities abroad. Rwandans interviewed by Freedom House raised the same concerns.

In addition to mistrust at an individual level, Rwandans report suspicion of official bodies, including embassies and diaspora organizations. ABC reviewed footage of the chair of the Rwandan Diaspora of Australia, who reportedly received political asylum in Australia in 2004, pledging loyalty in Rwandan's High Commission in Singapore in 2017.[168] Similarly, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has reported based on leaked video that Rwandans were forced to take a loyalty oath to the RPF in the Rwandan Embassy to the United Kingdom.[169]

The result of community- and acquaintance-level avenues of repression, as well as the Rwandan regime's expansive view of what constitutes dissent, is that all Rwandans are at risk of transnational repression. Rwanda's government has clearly demonstrated its ability and willingness to harm its "enemies" regardless of distance. Many governments are aware of the problem and have taken some action to protect Rwandans, such as when British intelligence services disrupted an assassination plot in London.[170] The US Congress has heard testimony about it multiple times,[171] while Sweden expelled a Rwandan diplomat for refugee espionage [172] and South Africa expelled three after an attack on General Nyamwasa's home.[173] A Canada Border Services Agency report describes "a well-documented pattern of repression [including threats, attacks, and killings], of Rwandan government critics, both inside and outside Rwanda,"[174] the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada has specifically documented the persecution of RNC members,[175] and British intelligence services have issued at least one warning for the Rwandan government to end its campaign against Rwandans in the United Kingdom.[176] Despite this abundant knowledge at high levels of government, the Rwandan campaign of transnational repression continues, and ordinary Rwandans around the world remain unable to fully enjoy their basic human rights.

CASE STUDIES

Russia

Protesters gather in Vienna after the killing of vocal Chechen government critic "Martin B." Austrian police arrested two Russians from Chechnya for the fatal shooting. Image credit: Alex Halada/AFP via Getty Images.

The Russian government conducts highly aggressive transnational repression activities abroad. Its campaign, which heavily relies on assassination as a tool, targets former insiders and others who are perceived as threats to the regime's security. The government pairs this campaign with control over key cultural institutions operating abroad, in an effort to exert influence over the Russian diaspora. Unlike other states profiled in this report, however, the government does not use coercive measures against the Russian diaspora as a whole. Instead, it focuses on repressing activism within its own borders and on maintaining control of the domestic information environment to ensure that exiles do not reach domestic audiences. [177] Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, represents a significant exception by employing a brutal direct campaign to control the Chechen diaspora; his campaign is a unique example of a subnational regime operating its own transnational repression campaign.

The Russian campaign accounts for 7 of 26 assassinations or assassination attempts since 2014, as catalogued in Freedom House's global survey. It is also responsible for assaults, detentions, unlawful deportations, and renditions in eight countries, mostly in Europe. Of the 32 documented physical cases of Russian transnational repression, a remarkable 20 have a Chechen nexus.

The Kremlin

Since coming to power in 2000, Russian president Vladimir Putin has engaged in an ongoing subversion campaign in Europe and the United States, using tactics short of war.

As part of this "political warfare,"[178] the Putin government frequently builds influence networks through corrupt and corrupting means, disseminates disinformation, builds alliances with antiliberal parties and political actors, and conducts hacking operations. The government does all this while resisting and avoiding attribution, unlike in overt and clearly attributed public diplomacy efforts or soft-power efforts that rely on persuasion and attraction.

> The Russian campaign accounts for 7 of the 26 assassinations or assassination attempts since 2014.

The Kremlin's approach to transnational repression extends naturally from this "political warfare" concept. When selecting individual targets, the Kremlin focuses its efforts on those who may have defected to NATO member states and cooperate with their intelligence agencies, those who were considered to have previously engaged in armed conflict against Russia, or those who have run afoul of security services through business or political activities. A surprisingly common tactic is **assassination**; former intelligence officer Alexander Litvinenko was successfully killed via radiation poisoning in 2006,[179] while a nerve agent was used in the attempted assassination of former intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and daughter Yulia in 2018.[180] At a minimum, in Ukraine, Bulgaria, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the Kremlin has shown a willingness to kill perceived enemies abroad.[181] These attacks also come against the backdrop of numerous unexplained deaths of high-profile Russians in exile, their business partners, and other potential targets of the Russian state.[182] Even in cases where the evidence is unambiguous—the use of rare radioactive isotopes and nerve agents only available to the Russian government, or the clear identification of Russian intelligence agents—the government continues to deny its role. Most importantly, it continues to employ assassination as a tactic in the face of vocal international condemnation for doing so. In addition to eliminating the individual attacked, this overt campaign sends a message to anyone involved in political, intelligence, or business activities related to the Russian state. The ripple effect of each assassination goes beyond the individual.

This assassination campaign exists within a continuum alongside other tactics. The Kremlin is perhaps the world's most prolific abuser of the **Interpol** notice system. As other governments have found, Interpol notices and diffusions (see "Methods of Transnational Repression") are low-cost means for the Kremlin to harass and detain exiles.[183] The Kremlin's targeting of financier Bill Browder through Interpol Red Notices has made the tool famous,[184] but it uses the tactic to an extraordinary extent, and often against targets far less prominent. Without more transparency at Interpol, it is difficult to determine why or how the Kremlin is able to use its notice system so extensively. Nevertheless, Russia is responsible for a staggering 38 percent of all public Red Notices in the world, while the United States is responsible 4.3 percent and China 0.5 percent.[185] Russian authorities have even been able to use Red Notices to detain individuals residing in the United States for long periods of time.[186] For instance, in two separate public cases in the last two years, Russian asylum seekers spent over a year in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention based on Russian-sourced Interpol Red Notices.

Beyond the abuse of Interpol, Russians abroad who are engaged in high-profile political opposition face **surveillance and sophisticated hacking** campaigns with the same techniques the government uses against high-priority national security targets.[187]

The Kremlin combines these tactics with efforts to control the key pillars of the Russian community abroad—the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian-language media, and Russian cultural institutions. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian government has regained control over official cultural institutions with a presence abroad; this is especially true of the Orthodox Church, which reunited in 2006 under President Putin's leadership with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which emerged following the Russian Revolution.[188] In 2008, Moscow launched Rossotrudnichestvo (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) to coordinate activities meant to facilitate engagement with the diaspora, as well as other formal "soft power" activities.

Unlike other governments, like Rwanda's, the Kremlin's transnational repression campaign does not seek to control the entire Russian diaspora with coercion. Instead, the regime's domestic repression drives activists and others out of the country, seemingly on purpose. Despite Putin's increased rhetoric surrounding the importance of "compatriots" abroad and the creation of

Rossotrudnichestvo, much of the diaspora does not appear to be a priority. This may be rooted in the Russian government's dismissive attitude towards political opposition abroad: it does not believe opposition efforts can be effective without a domestic presence. As a Russian political exile living in Europe told Freedom House: "Generally the regime's position is, 'no person, no problem.'"[189]

The Chechen Republic

In distinction from the above, Russian citizens from the Chechen Republic, a province in the North Caucasus, face a total campaign of transnational repression directed by provincial leader Ramzan Kadyrov, with the approval of the Russian central government. The Chechen diaspora formed as the result of over a century of Russian occupation and colonization, and expanded dramatically during the 1994–96 and 1999–2000 wars for independence from Russia. After the defeat of the separatist movement in 2000, Kadyrov's father, Akhmad, headed the reintegrated republic under Russian rule. Ramzan, in turn, came to power soon after his father's assassination in 2004.

As leader of the Chechen Republic, Kadyrov has presided over a regime of remarkable brutality, defined by extensive torture, extrajudicial killings, anti-LGBT+ purges, and the murders of journalists and human rights defenders.[190] With a small, mostly rural population of under 1.5 million, Kadyrov's rule has taken on a highly personal character, approaching that of a personality cult.[191] Intense repression has driven tens of thousands of Chechens to flee the territory, often seeking asylum in Europe for fear that they would not be safe from Kadyrov and his circle in other parts of Russia.

Even in exile, Kadyrov's brutality follows Chechens. Two assassinations in early 2009—of former military commander Sulim Yamadayev in Dubai, and of former bodyguard Umar Israilov in Austria—marked the beginning of the pattern. Israilov had fled the country and turned witness against the regime, testifying to a pattern of torture and execution by Kadyrov and his circle. He was killed before his testimony could be heard in court.[192]

Since then, Chechen dissidents abroad have been **killed and attacked** at alarming rates. In 2016, two Chechens living in Turkey, Ruslan Israpilov and Abdulwahid Edelgiriev, were killed by people later identified by international media outlets as Russian agents.[193] In August 2019, former fighter Selimkhan Khangoshvili was shot and killed on a park bench in central Berlin. In January 2020, prominent Kadyrov critic Imran Aliyev was stabbed to death in a hotel room in Lille, France.[194] In February, another critic, Tumso Abdurahmonov, was attacked with a hammer in his apartment in Sweden while he slept, but he managed to subdue his assailant. Abdurahmonov claimed he warned authorities about a Chechen man who traveled with Aliyev to France and subsequently fled Europe after Aliyev's killing.[195] And in July, Mamikhan Umarov, a Kadyrov critic who was working with European authorities, was killed in a Vienna suburb.[196]

> Russia is responsible for a staggering 38 percent of all public Red Notices in the world.

There is strong evidence connecting these attacks to Kadyrov, but they most likely require the cooperation and engagement of the Kremlin itself. Investigative journalists at Bellingcat identified the man caught fleeing the scene of Khangoshvili's murder as a contract killer linked to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).[197] Abdurahmonov's attackers would have had to engage in extensive travel and possess sufficient operational skill to enter his Swedish residence while he slept.

Unlike for other Russian citizens abroad, the Chechen assassination campaign rests atop a base of extensive **surveillance**, **digital intimidation**, and **coercion by proxy** against the entire Chechen diaspora.[198] With Chechens living abroad increasing turning to digital platforms like YouTube to voice their dissent against Kadyrov, the government has found it easy to collect information on its critics from open sources. The government then arrests, threatens, and sometimes tortures family members who remain in Chechnya, to use as leverage against dissenters abroad. Meanwhile, the government has learned to use its own tools to recruit or even seed asylum seekers to act as agents within the Chechen diaspora.[199]

Despite the extreme repression that Chechens face at home, asylum in Europe has become difficult to achieve for many individuals seeking to join what journalist and expert Elena Milashina called the "third wave" of Chechen refugees.[200] The two wars for independence, along with the 2000–09 insurgency against Russia, bound Chechen militancy with international terrorism in the international imagination. The presence of Chechens and other North Caucasians in the

ranks of organizations that participated in the Syrian civil war, like the Islamic State (IS) militant group, contributed further to the perception of Chechnya first and foremost as a source of terrorist activity.[201]

> "This modern age and technology allow us to know everything and we can find any of you."
> –Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov

These associations have made it easier for European governments to default to national security arguments when rejecting asylum claims or deporting Chechens, especially as terrorist attacks regularly occur in Europe and amid hardening attitudes towards migration in general. Harsh border measures imposed after 2015 resulted in a constant process of "pushbacks" at the Belarusian-Polish land border, with Polish authorities returning Chechens without allowing them to apply for asylum.[202] Chechnya's government understands this dynamic, and likely manipulates the distribution of national security information to European governments in order to prompt deportations.[203]

As Milashina has written, the situation is paradoxical: while European political authorities have recognized the uniquely brutal nature of Kadyrov's rule in Chechnya, they frequently deny asylum to Chechens who flee it.[204] Those deported at the Chechen Republic's request face brutality. Some who return to Chechnya from Europe are initially allowed to go free, only to be imprisoned or killed later in "security operations" that human rights groups have described as extrajudicial executions by another name.[205]

Kadyrov himself is open about his intent to control Chechens abroad, by force if necessary. In 2016, he spoke to state TV and addressed Chechens living abroad who criticized his regime:

> You are harming yourselves. At some point, after 5 to 10 years you will have to return, or your parents will say you should come back, or you will be chased from Europe. Then there will be nowhere for you to go, and then we will make you answer for every one of your words, for every action you have taken. I know all the sites, I know all the youth who live in Europe, every Instagram, Facebook, every social site, we record all of your words and we note them, we have all of your information, who, what, we know it all. This modern age and technology allow us to know everything and we can find any of you, so don't make it worse for yourselves.[206]

In September 2020, Kadyrov announced the formation of a new agency for Chechens abroad. He promised to "do better" to support "good Chechens," while doing "to bad Chechens... what we have to."[207]

CASE STUDIES

Saudi Arabia

Pakistani soldiers patrol the streets as posters welcome Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman five months after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Image credit: Aamir Qureshi/AFP via Getty Images.

The Saudi Arabian government is perhaps the best known in the world for targeting its nationals abroad. The brutal 2018 murder and dismemberment of dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the country's Istanbul consulate brought transnational repression into popular awareness. Khashoggi's killing was not an isolated event, but rather the outcome of an increasingly physical, targeted campaign against critics and former insiders, including members of the royal family, that has rapidly escalated since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman began his rise to power in 2015. This campaign has included extensive use of spyware, coercion by proxy, detentions, assaults, and renditions in nine countries spanning the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Asia.[208] Facilitating Riyadh's extraterritorial efforts closer afield is a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security agreement that sets broad parameters for cooperation against dissidents. The Saudi Arabian government's transnational repression campaign also includes a uniquely gendered aspect; women fleeing gender-based repression in the country face characteristic transnational repression efforts from the state.

An escalating, personalized campaign

The Saudi transnational repression campaign is highly personalized, as befits an absolute monarchy where the royal house is identical to the state. Human rights defenders, journalists, former insiders, and online critics are vulnerable to charges of subverting that state, even if they do not explicitly speak out against the royal family. Prince Mohammed bin Salman became Minister of Defense in 2015 and Crown Prince in June 2017, and his rise to power tracks closely with the regime's recent transnational repression

efforts. This escalation also coincides with a purge against members of the royal family, government ministers, and businessmen that bin Salman launched soon after assuming the role of Crown Prince.[209]

Five of the 10 physical cases of Saudi transnational repression documented by Freedom House were carried out against **former insiders**. In addition to the Khashoggi assassination, two princes were rendered from France and the aide to a rival prince was rendered from Jordan. One of the princes disappeared after voicing support for a coup in a social media post; the other, Prince Sultan bin Turki II, was seeking reconciliation with bin Salman after suing the royal family for kidnapping him in the early 2000s. Bin Turki boarded a plane provided by the royal family in France, thinking he was heading to Cairo for a meeting; he was instead drugged and flown to Riyadh, and has not been been heard from since.[210]

Five of the 10 physical cases of Saudi transnational repression documented by Freedom House were carried out against former insiders.

As in other cases Freedom House has studied, the physical campaign against former insiders is built on indirect and nonphysical means of repression. In August 2020, former Saudi intelligence officer Saad al-Jabri, who lives in Canada, brought a lawsuit against bin Salman and others, alleging the Saudi government deployed spyware against him, plotted to kill him, and detained his family members in an effort to coerce him into returning to Saudi Arabia. In his lawsuit, al-Jabri alleges that a group of Saudi nationals stopped at the Canadian border were carrying the equipment needed to dismember a corpse.[211] Al-Jabri's allegations represent a familiar pattern of escalatory targeting, involving multiple means of repression against a single person.

There is ample evidence that Jamal Khashoggi's murder was the culmination of a longer process of escalating attacks against multiple targets. The mobile phone of Omar Abdulaziz, an activist and confidante of Khashoggi, was infected with Pegasus **spyware**, and one of his brothers was apparently coerced into asking Abdulaziz to cease his activism and return to Saudi Arabia. Abdulaziz did not comply, and two of his brothers were subsequently imprisoned along with several friends.[212] Khashoggi himself was subjected to serious **harassment** on Twitter. His son, who lived in Saudi Arabia, was issued a travel ban that would have been lifted upon Khashoggi's return to the country.[213] Khashoggi asked his fiancée to await him outside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul when he visited to procure marriage documents, to ensure that someone could alert the Turkish government if he did not return. He was murdered while she waited outside.[214]

Further intertwining the escalatory targeting of Abdulaziz and Khashoggi, details extracted from the former's mobile phone may have played a role in the plot against the latter.[215] At the time, the two critics were collaborating to combat the notorious mass of government-directed inauthentic accounts on Twitter.[216] The Saudi regime closely controls expression within the country, and pays special attention to dissident activity on Twitter. Saud al-Qahtani, a royal court adviser, oversaw Saudi Arabia's "electronic army" or "electronic flies."[217] In an unprecedented tactic that displays the country's wealth, and willingness to go to extreme ends, Saudi Arabian authorities even bribed two Saudi Twitter employees to assist in the surveillance of critics using the platform.[218]

Despite clear evidence of high-level government involvement in the targeting of Saudi nationals abroad, the international response has been muted, effectively sending a message of impunity to Saudi officials and others around the world. Within weeks of Khashoggi's murder, the CIA confirmed that bin Salman ordered the assassination himself.[219] Saudi Arabia's democratic partners failed to hold the Saudi government or bin Salman to account, however. US president Donald Trump famously strayed from the conclusions of the American intelligence community, defending bin Salman.[220] "I saved his ass," Trump told a reporter. "I was able to get Congress to leave him alone. I was able to get them to stop."[221]

The United States implemented Global Magnitsky sanctions against 17 Saudi nationals for their role in killing Khashoggi, but bin Salman was not on the list.[222] In July 2020, the UK implemented similar targeted sanctions against 20 Saudi officials involved in the assassination, including al-Qahtani, who intelligence agencies agree was central to orchestrating the operation,[223] but not bin Salman.

Saudi Arabian courts sentenced five people to death for their role. The government dismissed–but did not try or convict–al-Qahtani from his media advisory role.[224] Meanwhile, Saudi

rights activists believe al-Qahtani is still managing the regime's "electronic army."[225] Far from offering real justice, this partial show of accountability was a nod to international pressure that largely targeted lower-level operatives while avoiding repercussions at the top. Though the Khashoggi assassination certainly created a public-relations crisis for the Saudi regime, the lack of repercussions for the regime or for bin Salman means this personalized campaign of transnational repression will likely continue undeterred.

Gulf cooperation

Freedom House found renditions of Saudi nationals from three Gulf states: Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There was clear cooperation on the part of the host states in all three cases which, when combined with known security agreements among GCC member states, illuminates the region's institutionalized channels of transnational repression.

In addition to a 2004 antiterrorism agreement,[226] a 2012 GCC joint security agreement specifies that signatories will "extradite persons in their territory who have been charged or convicted by competent authorities in any state party." Such a broad provision, applied within a group of countries that routinely violate human rights through dubious legal proceedings, is ripe for abuse. In 2014, as the Kuwaiti parliament was considering the agreement's ratification, Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that Gulf states already engaged in problematic cooperation, prosecuting their own citizens for criticizing other GCC states and their leaders.[227]

The full extent of cooperation between Gulf states is unknown. As true monarchies, these governments are notable for their opaque operation,[228] and possess poor human rights records. Evidence suggests informal and personal cooperation occurs beyond what is specified in formal security agreements. In 2017, previously secret handwritten agreements dating back to 2013 and 2014 between several Gulf states were made public. The 2013 agreement, signed by the Saudi king and the emirs of Qatar and Kuwait, prevents conferring asylum, refugee status, or nationality to individuals who oppose their homelands' regimes, and bars support for "deviant" groups or "antagonistic" media.[229]

GCC cooperation has resulted in clear violations of human rights and international law. In May 2018, Loujain al-Hathloul, a prominent women's rights activist, was arrested by Abu Dhabi police while attending university in the UAE. In what was effectively a kidnapping, al-Hathloul was immediately placed on a Saudi private jet bound for Saudi Arabia; she was then issued a travel ban, and was arrested that July.[230] Her family says she was tortured in detention. In December 2020, she was convicted of spying and conspiring against the kingdom.

The Qatari government's cooperation in the 2017 **detention and rendition** of Mohammad Abdullah al-Otaibi showed a willingness to openly violate asylum protections. Al-Otaibi, a human rights defender, fled Saudi Arabia less than five months after he was charged with illegally forming an organization in relation to his human rights work. He received refugee status in Qatar, and was preparing to resettle safely in Europe as part of a United Nations protection program within two months of receiving that status. In May 2017, he arrived at Doha's airport to board his resettlement flight to Norway, when he was apprehended by Qatari security forces. He was transferred to Saudi Arabia four days later, and is now serving a 14-year prison sentence.[231]

In another case of targeting in transit, a Saudi poet and member of a tribe with historical claims to the throne was arrested at a Kuwaiti airport and rendered to Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaiti government was clear about the official nature of their cooperation: a tweet from their interior ministry confirmed the deportation, stating that it was undertaken at the Saudi government's request, "under bilateral mutual security arrangements."[232]

In what was effectively a kidnapping, al-Hathloul was immediately placed on a Saudi private jet bound for Saudi Arabia.

Gender-based transnational repression

Consistent with the personalized nature of Saudi repression and the central importance of the monarchy, transnational repression by the state reflects, and sometimes supports, control sought at the family level. The Saudi Arabian guardianship system requires that women receive permission from a male guardian to engage in many basic activities. Recent legal reforms have reduced the guardianship system's scope, allowing women to obtain passports and travel

abroad without their guardian's permission, but guardianship practices remain deeply entrenched at a societal level.[233]

Guardianship has historically afforded a significant amount of control over freedom of movement. An official e-government app, Absher, included guardianship controls, notably allowing guardians to grant entry and exit visas from their mobile phones. Even when visa controls were loosened in August 2019 following criticism, the app was not immediately updated to reflect the changes.[234] In parallel, the bin Salman-led government has used travel restrictions, likely numbering in the thousands, to control and coerce those they perceive as threats.[235] Access to state documents while abroad, like those Khashoggi needed for his marriage, is another tool the Saudi government uses to control its citizens.

The severe gender-based repression in Saudi Arabia results in women featuring more prominently in the country's transnational repression campaign than in other cases.

The severe gender-based repression in Saudi Arabia results in women featuring more prominently in the country's transnational repression campaign than in other cases. Globally, women are less frequently the targets of transnational repression, and are more often collateral damage, used as leverage points in family targeting. However, 2 of the 10 physical cases of Saudi transnational repression documented by Freedom House involved women as targets, and there are many more instances where women are targeted in nonphysical ways. The gender component of the Saudi campaign may partially be due to familial patterns of control, but can also be attributed to the uniquely high profile of Saudi women's rights activists, which makes them targets of the state in their own right.

In one case of transnational repression identified by Freedom House, state and family repression overlapped. Dina Ali Lasloom fled Saudi Arabia in 2017 in an attempt to escape a forced marriage. While waiting for a connecting flight in the Philippines, Lasloom claimed that airport officials confiscated her passport and boarding pass, and detained her for 13 hours. Eventually her uncles arrived and she was forced–restrained by duct tape and screaming, according to an HRW report–onto a return flight bound for Saudi Arabia.[236]

The Saudi embassy in the Philippines said Lasloom's rendition was a "family matter." But while the details of Lasloom's forced return and the role of Philippine authorities are murky, her rendition could not have occurred without the involvement of the Saudi state. The allegation that the Philippine authorities detained Lasloom and confiscated her passport points to the implementation of mobility controls by the Saudi authorities. By flagging or cancelling her passport, they could trigger Philippine intervention in her transit. Even if the event was instigated by a guardianship claim, the Saudi state is nevertheless extending its laws and authority beyond its own territory.

Moreover, the bin Salman-led government may have additional concrete and personal reasons to act in cases like Lasloom's. The number of Saudi asylum seekers has more than doubled in the two years after bin Salman's ascension to the role of Crown Prince.[237] As described in the *New Yorker*, "The implicit critique of this exodus was enough to stoke the ire of the Crown Prince."[238] The *New Yorker* report paints a chilling picture of how women who fled repressive family environments became targets of state repression. The women profiled reported that their bank accounts were frozen and their national ID cards were revoked; they also faced harassment by progovernment social media accounts, interrogation and harassment of family and friends residing in Saudi Arabia, run-ins with apparent Saudi operatives, and harassment by the Saudi embassy. In other words, women who flee Saudi Arabia's gender-based repression face many of the state's characteristic transnational repression tools.

CASE STUDIES

Iran

People in Berlin demand the release of Amirhossein Moradi, Mohammad Rajabi, and Saeed Tamjidi, who took part in street demonstrations and now face possible execution in Iran. Image credit: Sean Gallup/Getty Images.

The Iranian regime's expansive definition of who constitutes a threat to the Islamic Republic contributes to the breadth and intensity of its transnational repression campaign. The authorities frequently label the targeted dissidents and journalists as terrorists, using the term as a blanket justification for violence and disregard for due process. The campaign incorporates the full spectrum of transnational repression tactics, including assassinations, renditions, detentions, unlawful deportations, Interpol abuse, digital intimidation, spyware, coercion by proxy, and mobility controls. These tools have been deployed against Iranians in at least nine countries in Europe, the Middle East, and North America.[239]

The Iranian campaign is distinguished by the total commitment it receives from the state, the level of violence that it employs, and its sophisticated application of diverse methods against a similarly diverse set of targets. The result is intense intimidation of the Iranian diaspora, from which even those who avoid physical consequences ultimately suffer. As an Iranian activist told Freedom House, "They drain you emotionally, financially, in every way."[240]

Assassinations and renditions

Since the revolution in 1979, the Iranian regime has frequently conducted deadly attacks on exiles.[241] Many opponents of the new political system sought safety abroad, and the diaspora continued to grow as others fled the devastating war with Iraq in the 1980s and worsening repression over the past two decades. The regime's transnational repression is entangled

with its parallel campaigns of bombings and assassinations aimed at Jewish, Israeli, and US targets around the world; Israeli and US forces have also assassinated Iranian officials and agents, both inside and outside Iran.[242] Iranian leaders frequently portray its attacks on exiles as part of the same struggle against the United States and Israel, which they accuse of supporting terrorists.[243]

After a lull in exile **assassinations** in the 2000s, Tehran has resumed the tactic in Europe and Turkey in recent years. Since 2014, the regime has been linked to five assassinations or assassination attempts in three countries, and plots were thwarted in at least two others. In December 2015, Mohammad Reza Kolahi Samadi, a refugee living in the Netherlands since 1981, was assassinated outside his home in Almere. The Iranian authorities accused him of being responsible for a 1981 bombing in Iran that was carried out by the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an outlawed militant group. In November 2017, Ahmad Molla Nissi was shot and killed in The Hague, the Netherlands. He had formerly been a leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), another militant group opposed to the Iranian regime.[244] In November 2019, Masoud Molavi, a former Iranian intelligence officer who had gone into exile and begun distributing information about the regime from abroad, was gunned down on the streets of Istanbul. Turkish officials ascribed his killing to the Iranian authorities, an assessment shared by the United States.[245] An Iranian media owner, Saeed Karimian, was also killed in Istanbul in May 2017, although Iranian state involvement is less clear in that case.[246]

Since 2014, the regime has been linked to five assassinations or assassination attempts in three countries, and plots were thwarted in at least two others.

Belgian authorities disrupted a bomb plot against a gathering in France of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a group associated with the MEK, in July 2018.[247] An Iranian diplomat was among those arrested and is currently standing trial in Belgium for personally transporting the bomb.[248] In September 2018, Danish intelligence officials said they had disrupted an assassination attempt organized by the Iranian regime against the head of the ASMLA in Denmark.[249] Albanian authorities announced in October 2019 that they had foiled multiple attacks against an MEK compound in that country.[250]

Another recent tactic is **renditions**, in which Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leads operations to kidnap exiles from other countries and forcibly repatriate them. In October 2019, Ruhollah Zam, a refugee in France who ran a popular website and a channel on the social media platform Telegram, traveled to Iraq for unknown reasons and was promptly taken to Iran. The IRGC said the kidnapping was "a complicated intelligence operation," although Iraqi officials denied that the IRGC had independently taken Zam from Iraqi soil.[251] Zam was tried for offenses against the state, convicted, and eventually executed in December 2020.[252] In November 2019, Rasoul Danialzadeh, a businessman with connections to the family of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, was brought from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in an intelligence operation to face corruption charges in Iran.[253] In August 2020, the IRGC kidnapped California-based activist Jamshid Sharmahd from the UAE while he was traveling to India. He has been accused of responsibility for a 2008 terrorist attack in Iran. Sharmahd had previously been the target of an assassination plot in California.[254] And in October 2020, the IRGC claimed credit for kidnapping a Swedish citizen of Iranian origin—Habib Asyud, another leader of the ASMLA—as he was transiting Turkey.[255] In all of these cases, the targets were afforded no due process or opportunity to challenge their removal.

Coerced or voluntary recruitment of Iranians abroad is a key component of the regime's transnational repression campaign. Authorities in Sweden charged a man with spying on ethnic Arab refugees from Iran in November 2019.[256] In an August 2020 interview with the *Guardian*, a US-based Iranian software engineer described being imprisoned for a week on a trip to visit family in Iran, during which he was pressured to act as an agent for the regime. He agreed in order to be released, but then publicized his ordeal and refused to cooperate.[257]

Despite its relative international isolation, the Iranian state is still able in some cases to use a combination of bilateral pressure and co-optation of other countries' institutions to achieve **detentions and deportations**. The rendition of Habib Asyud from Turkey in October 2020 would have required cooperation from Turkish authorities. In December 2019, two participants in the nationwide protests of that year, Mohammad Rajabi and Saeed Tamjidi, fled to Turkey and applied for asylum but were summarily returned to Iran

by Turkish authorities. They now face the death penalty.[258] The regime has also continued to use Interpol to harass exiles, even though the clear lack of judicial independence in the country should limit the credibility of its notices. Mehdi Khosravi, a political refugee in the United Kingdom, was arrested in Italy in 2016 and held for a week based on an Iranian "red notice" with Interpol; he had previously traveled elsewhere in the European Union without difficulty.[259]

"Everyday" tactics: Threats, spyware, coercion by proxy, and mobility controls

The Iranian state's transnational repression reaches far beyond those who have been kidnapped, killed, or detained, exerting other forms of pressure on anyone involved in opposition politics or independent journalism. The regime is notable for the broad spectrum of tactics that it employs, which collectively amount to a constant barrage of **harassment**, **intimidation**, and **surveillance**.

Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist in New York, was threatened with kidnapping following the rendition of Jamshid Sharmahd, the US-based activist.[260] In January 2020, Reporters without Borders (RSF) counted 200 Iranian journalists living overseas who had been threatened, including 50 who had received death threats.[261] In February 2020, four UN special rapporteurs issued a statement about the targeting of Iranian journalists abroad, highlighting a written death threat against journalist Rana Rahimpour.[262] The pressure sometimes involves smear campaigns that take on surreal dimensions, such as the creation of fake news websites that mirror real ones and falsify statements by journalists in order to discredit them.[263]

The regime frequently pairs these threats with **coercion by proxy**, in which family members within Iran are threatened or detained in order to silence exiles. The journalist

> "It grows a distance between you."
>
> –Iranian exile speaking about being forced to conceal their work from their family

Masih Alinejad's sister was forced to disown her on state television; her brother was arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison.[264] Other journalists in RSF's research described elderly family members being called in for questioning. The authorities often refuse to allow relatives of exiles to travel abroad, creating an implicit threat by guaranteeing state access to exiles' loved ones. Dissidents also have their passports confiscated and their ability to travel curtailed.[265]

For some Iranians abroad, the only solution is to keep their family at arm's length and to obscure their political activities. One Iranian activist described being forced to conceal his work from his family, saying, "It grows a distance between you."[266]

Iranian authorities also run highly sophisticated **spyware** campaigns. According to a paper on the topic from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), "offensive cyber operations have become a core tool of Iranian statecraft," and attacks on civil society "often foreshadow" attacks on other, harder targets.[267] Iranians abroad receive complex spear-phishing attempts, with one example imitating an email from US Citizenship and Immigration Services, and another setting up a fake event for human rights activists in Spain in order to trick them into downloading malicious software.[268] An Iranian exile journalist told researcher Marcus Michaelsen, "There is no day when I open my email and I don't have a phishing email."[269]

CASE STUDIES

Turkey

Former Turkish prime minister, and current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses Kosovo citizens at a rally in Pristina. Image credit: Samir Yordamovic/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

The Turkish state's current campaign of transnational repression is remarkable for its intensity, its geographic reach, and the suddenness with which it escalated. Since the coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July 2016, the regime has pursued its perceived enemies in at least 31 different host countries spread across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The campaign is also notable for its heavy reliance on **renditions**, in which the government and its intelligence agency persuade the targeted states to hand over individuals without due process, or with a slight fig leaf of legality. Freedom House catalogued 58 of these renditions since 2014. No other perpetrator state was found to have conducted such a large number of renditions, from so many host countries, during the coverage period—and the documented total is almost certainly an undercount.

Ankara's campaign has primarily targeted people affiliated with the movement of religious leader Fethullah Gülen, which the government blames for the coup attempt. Recently, however, the effort has expanded, applying the same tactics to Kurdish and leftist individuals. As Turkey has shifted toward a more consolidated authoritarianism under Erdoğan, with overwhelming power concentrated in the presidency, its practice of transnational repression has grown more extreme.

Before the coup attempt

Prior to 2016, Turkey's government had increasingly sought to use its diaspora for political ends, but it did not engage in extensive transnational repression activities. Under Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which held power

beginning in the early 2000s, the government viewed Turks living abroad both as a potential source of domestic political support and as a resource for advancing its foreign policy priorities.[270] But stark divisions within the diaspora—reflecting divisions within Turkey between Turkish nationalists and Kurdish nationalists, and between leftists and Islamists, among others—were exacerbated by the state's more overt politicization of such communities. These rifts sometimes erupted into street clashes, and Kurdish and leftist activists in particular reported feeling threatened by the state.[271]

The threats were not necessarily imaginary. In January 2013, three Kurdish exiles, including a cofounder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an outlawed militant group, were murdered at a Kurdish cultural center in Paris, France. A Turkish man who was arrested following the killing died in custody before he could stand trial, leaving allegations that he had been an agent of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MİT) unresolved.[272]

There were also signs that Turkey's international posture was changing as President Erdoğan consolidated power, especially after 2013. As he pivoted away from his formerly moderate image and toward hard-line Turkish nationalism, the Turkish government strengthened its ties to overseas nationalist groups like the Osmanen Germania biker gang, which was accused of spying on and threatening Turkish exiles, and which German authorities banned in 2018.[273] Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs, commonly known as the Diyanet, which oversees imams and mosques for the Turkish diaspora, also became an instrument for surveilling exiles.[274]

Rapid escalation after the coup attempt

The failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, triggered a transformation in Turkey's use of transnational repression. Almost immediately after a night of violence in which coup plotters in the Turkish military killed more than 250 people but failed to seize power, Ankara initiated a "global purge" that mirrored its domestic crackdown.[275] Both operated on the basis of guilt by association, condemning people for their real or suspected connections to the Gülen movement, often with little effort to link them directly to the coup attempt itself. The result is that many targets of renditions have been **teachers or education administrators** who worked at schools that the Gülen movement runs around the world.[276]

The main tactics of the global campaign have been mobility controls, detentions, and illegal renditions. Turkey's government says it has returned 116 people from 27 countries in connection with the coup attempt.[277] In a letter to the Turkish leadership in May 2020, UN experts referred to "at least 100 individuals … subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention, enforced disappearance and torture." In its own research, Freedom House was able to identify 58 people rendered from 17 countries. Family members of the victims, in addition to dozens of people rendered in mass cases who have not been individually identified in public sources, likely make up the difference between this number and the Turkish government's statements.

From the perspective of the Turkish state, all of these people are legitimate counterterrorism targets. After the Gülen movement and the AKP split politically in 2013, but long before the coup attempt, the government designated the movement a terrorist organization, dubbing it the "Fethullahist Terror Organization" or "FETÖ" and ascribing to it a variety of far-fetched plots. The designation is now embedded in Turkish law and practice, continuing a long history of abuse of the terrorism label in the country. At the international level, in imitation of Interpol's color-coded notification system, Ankara has released its own list entitled "Terör Arananlar," or "Most Wanted Terrorists," which includes about a thousand suspects. Most are alleged to be affiliated with the PKK, but others are Gülen movement members, members of minor leftist groups, and in a handful of cases, members of Islamist militant groups like the Islamic State.[278] Adopting the United States' terminology, the progovernment English-language newspaper *Daily Sabah* regularly features articles on the campaign in a section of its website called "The War on Terror."[279] All 110 of the physical transnational repression cases that Freedom House catalogued as having been perpetrated by the Turkish state involved accusations of terrorism.

> No other country has conducted such a large number of renditions, from as many host countries, during the coverage period.

Turkey's top officials openly claim credit for the kidnapping offensive against the Gülen movement, and praise the role of the MİT in the renditions.[280] State media articles describe

MİT's direct involvement in multiple abductions, as in Sudan in 2017.[281] An investigation by European journalists linked aircraft used in the operations to front companies connected to MİT.[282] As President Erdoğan said in a speech after the abduction of six teachers from Kosovo in March 2018, "Wherever they may go, we will wrap them up and bring them here."[283]

> The progovernment English-language newspaper *Daily Sabah* regularly features articles on the campaign in a section of its website called "The War on Terror."

A few of the renditions, including one involving a group from Azerbaijan, appear to be classic abductions—people were bundled into cars on the street and then reappeared in Turkey with no procedures. But most have entailed the corruption and co-optation of host country institutions: local police or security services arrest Turkish citizens, who are then held in detention for a short period before being secretly transferred to Turkish custody and immediately taken to Turkey on Turkish aircraft. In the best-documented cases, there has been a thin veneer of legal procedure, as when Kosovar authorities revoked the residency permits of six Turkish schoolteachers and then declared them a national security threat and swiftly transferred them to Turkish custody. The operations are often clumsy. In Kosovo, one of the six men arrested and rendered to Turkey the same day was not on the original list—he was a different Turkish teacher with the same first name as the intended target.[284] In Mongolia, the attempted rendition of a school administrator sparked protests across the country, leading to his release and a crisis for the Mongolian government, which was seen as aiding the attempt.[285]

Ankara's aggressive campaign has had significant local repercussions. In Kosovo, the head of the intelligence agency was forced to resign after the March 2018 renditions.[286] Following a similar set of renditions in Moldova, the head of that country's intelligence service was convicted and given a suspended sentence for his involvement.[287] In at least these two cases, there were accusations that the Turkish government received high-level political support for the operations, but that the intelligence chiefs were blamed instead.

Mobility controls

Aside from renditions, the most important tool of Turkish transnational repression has been **mobility controls**. The authorities canceled more than 230,000 passports after the coup attempt in a bid to confine suspected opponents within Turkey and limit mobility for those already outside the country. The government also reported as lost or stolen an unknown number of passports. Gülen movement members abroad reported being unable to renew passports or have passports issued for children at Turkish consulates, meaning they would have to return to Turkey and face the risk of arrest. Although tens of thousands of passport cancelations were later officially rescinded, the process was marred with errors, and some of the affected individuals continued to encounter problems when using passports to travel. Canceled passports in turn created opportunities for detention during travel, and the detainees could then be extradited or rendered back to Turkey.

The Turkish government has tried to exploit Interpol to target exiles. Following the coup attempt, it allegedly tried to "batch" upload some 60,000 names onto the agency's notification system.[288] German chancellor Angela Merkel denounced these tactics in August 2017, arguing that Turkish "misuse" of the Interpol system had become unacceptable.[289] Ankara's flagrant abuse may have resulted in policy changes in some areas, though Interpol has not officially commented on the issue. Romanian court documents denying an extradition to Turkey in July 2019 appear to indicate that Interpol had created a policy to set aside requests based on the coup attempt as a violation of its rules against politically motivated requests.[290]

Interpol notifications nonetheless remained a useful tool, leading to the detentions of German-Turkish writer Doğan Akhanli and Swedish-Turkish journalist Hamza Yalçin in August 2017, and the unlawful deportations of two individuals accused of membership in the PKK from Serbia and Bulgaria. Due to the opacity of Interpol, and also to the fact that notices entered into the global system may persist in national systems even after they are revoked, it is difficult to determine whether the organization has genuinely dealt with the problem of politically motivated requests originating in Turkey. At a minimum, it is clear that Interpol notices continue to result in detentions of Turkish citizens around the world, including in cases where the request is likely related to the coup attempt. As of fall 2020, Turkish citizens associated with the Gülen movement continued to be detained in locations as far away as Panama, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia.[291]

A widening scope

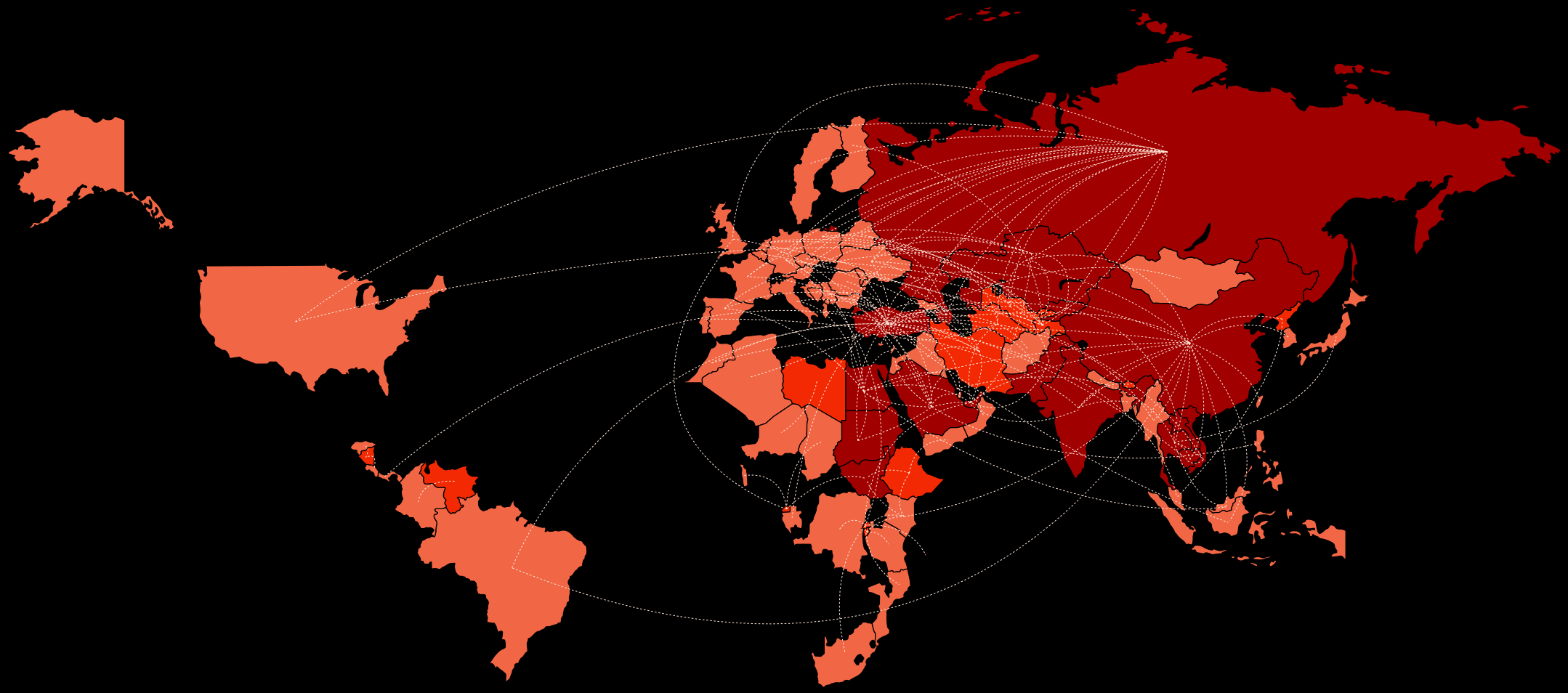
Although the Gülen movement has borne the brunt, Ankara's transnational repression campaign has widened beyond it. Can Dündar, then editor in chief of the major secularist daily *Cumhuriyet*, left the country for Germany in June 2016 after being sentenced to prison for leaking national security information in an article about Turkish arms shipments to Syria—on the same day an assailant tried to shoot him outside the courtroom. Since going into exile, Dündar has faced numerous threats. He and several other Turkish journalists in Germany have received protection from the German authorities.[292] In September 2020, the Turkish state moved to seize Dündar's assets in Turkey in connection with his conviction.[293]

Other recent incidents underscore the expansion of the **rendition** tactic to non-Gülenist targets. In March 2018, Ayten Öztürk was detained at an airport in Beirut, Lebanon, and held for five days before being handed over to Turkish officials. She was jailed in Turkey for five months without access to a lawyer, during which time she alleges she was tortured. Öztürk is accused of being linked to the left-wing Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C).[294]

> Can Dündar and several other Turkish journalists in Germany have received protection from the German authorities.

In September 2020, Isa Özer, a former local candidate of the largely Kurdish and left-wing Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), was rendered without due process from Odesa, Ukraine, to Turkey. The operation appeared very similar to the renditions of two Gülen movement members from Ukraine in 2018—there was almost no time between detention and handover, and no clear legal process.[295] Like thousands of other members of the BDP and its sister Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Özer is accused of PKK membership.

Mapping Transnational Repression



Each line represents a unique origin country-host country relationship through at least one incident of physical transnational repression. Every incident catalogued in the project is not mapped.

Origin Country **Host Country** **Origin & Host Country**

Regional Snapshots

Aggressive transnational repression campaigns are carried out by authorities around the world. In addition to the six origin states examined in this report's case studies, Freedom House identified 25 additional origin states, conducting transnational repression activities in 43 countries. Beyond the grave harms inflicted on diaspora and exile communities and their networks at home, these cross-border campaigns erode international norms of due process, and threaten democracy and human rights worldwide. The following snapshots offer an overview of transnational repression in five regions.

Asia

Koh Kong, Cambodia - 1998/05/01: Cambodian border police examine passports of people leaving Thailand at a newly-opened international border crossing. This connects with Had Lek in Thailand. Image credit: Jerry Redfern/LightRocket via Getty Images.

While China is the largest offender in Asia, numerous other governments in the region engage in transnational repression—notably those in **Thailand**, **Laos**, **Cambodia**, and **Vietnam**. Authorities in these countries most frequently operate within the region, often in Thailand. Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam all use coercion by proxy, digital threats, and mobility controls against exiles, in addition to physical tactics of repression. Cambodia and Vietnam have deployed spyware against targets abroad. While Thailand has acquired commercial spyware, its deployment against exiles is not confirmed.

The **Thai government** is allegedly behind multiple assassinations and unexplained disappearances in Laos, renditions from Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, as well as an assault in Japan. The campaign appears to be a dissent-quelling strategy of the military-dominated government that first came to power in a 2014 coup,[296] with the first documented case in 2016. It targets a narrow profile of individuals: all 11 people in cases documented by Freedom House were viewed by the government as engaging in antistate actions in some form, including violating Thailand's draconian lèse-majesté law. All participated in some form

of political activism and all but one engaged in blogging or journalism, with YouTube, radio, and social media platforms being the most common mediums.

Freedom House documented fewer cases of transnational repression by Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, but campaigns by all three took place in Thailand. Thailand detained and rendered two Cambodian exiles in 2018 at the apparent request of the **Cambodian government**, and **Laos** is reportedly responsible for a rendition and an unexplained disappearance in Thailand. A prominent Vietnamese blogger and government critic was rendered from Bangkok in 2019. Separately, four Vietnamese activists in Cambodia suffered an acid attack in 2017, believed to have been ordered by **Vietnamese authorities**. Vietnam has also operated farther afield. Trinh Xuân Thanh, a Vietnamese businessman, asylum seeker, and former Communist Party official, was kidnapped from Berlin's Tiergarten park in 2017 along with a companion. The pair were rendered to Vietnam, where Thanh was sentenced to two life terms in prison. Vietnamese authorities apparently dispatched a seven-person intelligence team to carry out the operation.[297]

In addition to the four Southeast Asian countries, **Pakistan**, **Bhutan**, **North Korea**, and **India** have also targeted their nationals abroad. A Pakistani blogger living in the Netherlands, who had previously been detained and tortured for his work, was assaulted in February 2020 with suspected government involvement, and there were reports that his family members in Pakistan were also harassed.[298] In 2019, the United Arab Emirates rendered a Baloch activist to **Pakistan** after holding him incommunicado for seven months.[299] In 2014, a Bhutanese human rights activist and refugee who lived in exile in Nepal traveled to India for his human rights work, where he was arrested and rendered in a Bhutanese law enforcement operation.[300] **India** is the only origin state rated Free in *Freedom in the World* that is known to engage in physical forms of transnational repression. In 2015, an activist from India who had been granted asylum in the United Kingdom was detained in Portugal on an Interpol notice.[301] Also in 2015, India rendered an alleged member of an insurgent group from Bangladesh's capital, in collaboration with Bangladeshi law enforcement.[302]

North Korea has assassinated, rendered, and unlawfully deported its nationals abroad. Most well-known is the assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia in 2017, by North Korean agents and two accomplices who claimed they were tricked into poisoning him.[303] The North Korean government has also rendered and unlawfully deported defectors, including abducting a defector who had become a journalist in South Korea from the China-North Korea border. North Korea is also known to use mobility controls, family targeting, digital threats, and spyware to target those outside of the country.

> India is the only origin state rated Free in *Freedom in the World* that is known to engage in physical forms of transnational repression.

There are many more host countries for transnational repression in the region, including Afghanistan, which detained four Turkish teachers; Australia, where Chinese and Rwandan exiles have been threatened and face family targeting; Indonesia, the site of a Chinese assassination and a Turkish rendition; Malaysia, where dozens of Egyptian, Turkish, Chinese, and Thai citizens have been rendered; Mongolia, where Gülenists from Turkey have been targeted; Myanmar, which rendered a Turkish national and Chinese human rights defenders; the Philippines, where a Saudi woman was rendered; and South Korea, which unlawfully deported a Chinese businessman.

Sub-Saharan Africa

People attend the funeral ceremony for Welly Nzitonda, the son of human rights defender Pierre-Claver Mbonimpa, on November 10, 2015 in Bujumbura, Burundi. Image credit: Landry Nshimiye/AFP via Getty Images.

At least six sub-Saharan African countries have engaged in physical forms of transnational repression since the beginning of 2014: **Rwanda**, **Burundi**, **Equatorial Guinea**, **Ethiopia**, **Sudan**, and **South Sudan**. In total, exiles have been targeted in at least 12 sub-Saharan African countries since 2014. In addition to the regional culprits, China, Libya, and Turkey have also pursued exiles in these countries.

All sub-Saharan African countries that engage in physical forms of transnational repression, except South Sudan, also target the family members of their perceived enemies abroad. Burundian human rights defender Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, for example, fled the country after an assassination attempt in August 2015. While he was recuperating from his injuries in a hospital in Belgium, his son and son-in-law were both killed by security forces in apparent retribution.[304] In addition to family targeting, Sudan and Rwanda both use digital threats against exiles, and Rwanda and Ethiopia have targeted them using spyware.

While Rwanda's campaign, examined more closely in a case study, appears to be the most far-reaching and active in the region, authorities in **Burundi** have carried out a violent campaign against exiled opponents. A report by the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board says the Imbonerakure, a government-controlled youth militia, "operate permanently in Burundi's border countries: Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, but also in more distant countries such as Uganda or Kenya, Sudan and South Sudan." The report details multiple alleged assassinations, usually stabbings, of Burundian opposition members in Kenya and Uganda.[307] The attacks coincide with a wave of repression and violence in 2015 and 2016 that followed President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to run for an unconstitutional third term, which caused over 300,000 Burundians to flee by the end of 2016.[306] Jean de Dieu Kabura, an opposition figure who fled Burundi in 2015 during the political crisis, was found stabbed to death in Nairobi in January 2016.[307] Tanzanian and Burundian security forces collaborated to detain and render at least eight Burundian refugees and asylum seekers in July and August 2020. All eight were imprisoned upon being returned to Burundi.[308]

The bulk of **Equatorial Guinean** cases documented by Freedom House target exiled opposition figures the government accused of plotting a coup.[309] One opposition

leader was detained in Chad and then released after Chadian authorities said there was no evidence for the Equatoguinean government's claims.[310] Two other men accused of involvement in the alleged coup attempt were rendered from Togo; and four opposition members were rendered from South Sudan days after arriving there from Spain. Many dissidents also claim that the 2019 armed assault on Salomon Abeso, an exiled opposition member sentenced to death in 2002 and also accused of involvement in the alleged coup attempt, in London, was an assassination attempt.

The Horn of Africa is broadly an active area, with cases of transnational repression carried out by the governments of Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan. The **Ethiopian** cases documented by Freedom House took place before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, a transition that initially resulted in some prodemocratic reforms. However, reports in late 2020 indicate that as the internal Tigrayan conflict unfolds, the Ethiopian government has rendered Ethiopian Tigrayans, including some who serve in the country's military abroad.[311] Earlier, in 2014, there were three renditions of perceived political opponents from Kenya, and one each from Yemen and South Sudan. A 2017 CitizenLab report identified the use of commercial spyware against dissidents outside of Ethiopia, including in the United States and United Kingdom.

Under Omar al-Bashir's repressive regime in **Sudan**—which ended in 2019 when he was pushed out by military leaders and civilian protesters—several activists in exile were detained abroad, rendered, or unlawfully deported. In December 2016, three Sudanese in Saudi Arabia who expressed support for protests and civil disobedience in Sudan on social media were arrested and detained until their eventual deportation in July 2017.[312] Separately, in 2016 and 2017, four South Sudanese exiles were rendered from Kenya.

> At least six sub-Saharan African countries have engaged in physical forms of transnational repression since the beginning of 2014.

In addition to these six countries, there is evidence that **Eritrea** and **Djibouti** have engaged in transnational repression, though not in the time period or meeting the other criteria for inclusion for this report. Samatar Ahmed Osman, a Djibouti blogger living in exile, was subject to family targeting in 2019, when his wife was arrested in Djibouti and allegedly questioned about his activism.[313] Eritreans as far afield as Europe report fears of state surveillance,[314] and Amnesty International has documented harassment of Eritrean diaspora members and diaspora organizations. In one example, the Eritrean embassy in Nairobi allegedly interfered with the establishment and operations of a civil society organization, Eritreans for Diaspora for East Africa.[315] Meanwhile, the conflict in Ethiopia has reportedly sparked a wave of renditions of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia.[316]

Eurasia

Takjik opposition activist Sharofiddin Gadoev stands in front of a photo of his cousin, fellow activist Umarali Kuvvatov, as he speaks at the Oslo Freedom Forum 2019 in Oslo, Norway. Image credit: Julia Reinhart/Getty Images.

Many governments in Eurasia practice transnational repression. In addition to Russia, which is examined in its own case study; the governments of **Azerbaijan**, **Kazakhstan**, **Kyrgyzstan**, **Tajikistan**, **Turkmenistan**, and **Uzbekistan** have all used physical transnational repression against exiles since 2014.[317]

Regional organizations facilitate direct international cooperation against exiles among member states. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which counts as its members China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan, and more recently India and Pakistan, promotes cooperation against not only terrorism—which can be invoked in targeted prosecutions of exiles—but also "extremism" and "separatism." The SCO helps states maintain a shared "blacklist," and facilitates information sharing about threats in the region.[318] The Minsk Convention also facilitates information sharing, and states in the region have cited it to justify handing over exiles. Additionally, governments of the region are prolific abusers of Interpol to target critics—not only those in Russia, but in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, all of the states in the region that use physical transnational repression also use coercion by proxy and digital threats. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Russia have used spyware abroad against exiles; Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan use digital surveillance domestically, but it is unclear if they have deployed it abroad.

Tajikistani exiles faced the largest wave of transnational repression in Eurasia during the period under study, as the government consolidated power at home and targeted the opposition that fled abroad. Thirty-eight of 129 coded incidents from the region originated from Tajikistan, showing extensive detentions as well as unlawful deportations, renditions, an assault, an unexplained disappearance, and one assassination. Maksud Ibragimov's case is emblematic. Born in Tajikistan, he later renounced his Tajikistani citizenship and became a citizen of Russia, where he founded the Tajik Youth for the Revival of Tajikistan.[319] He was first detained there in October 2014; he was released the following month but stripped of his Russian citizenship, and soon afterward was the victim of a severe stabbing attack on a Moscow street.

The following January he was abducted and reappeared in Tajikistan, where he was tortured and sentenced to 17 years in prison.[320] In March 2015, Umarali Kuvvatov, another opposition leader in exile, was shot and killed on the street in Istanbul soon after he had applied for asylum.[321]

Authorities in **Azerbaijan** also aggressively target opposition figures and journalists abroad. Since 2014, they have conducted five renditions, from Ukraine, Georgia, and Turkey. In four of the cases, the victim was a journalist or a journalist's spouse. Journalist Afgan Muxtarli was kidnapped off the street in Tbilisi in May 2017 and reappeared a day later in the custody of authorities in Azerbaijan.[322] In at least two other cases, Azerbaijan authorities used Interpol notices to have individuals detained abroad so they could be subject to further targeting. For example, journalist Fikret Huseynli, who had received refugee protection in the Netherlands, was detained in Ukraine and had his passport held, awaiting determination of his case based on an Interpol filing. While he was stuck in Ukraine, men speaking Azeri assaulted him, though he was ultimately able to flee the country.[323]

Kazakhstan's transnational repression efforts have focused on political opposition figures and former insiders, especially associates of Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former minister and banking official accused of widespread embezzlement and financing revolutionary activities. Ablyazov himself was detained in France in 2013, before the reporting period, and detained for most of the following three years; his wife and daughter were seized and rendered to Kazakhstan from Italy in 2013; they were permitted to returned to Italy after an international outcry.[324] Multiple people from Ablyazov's circle were also detained in Europe, often based on Interpol notices, only to be later released.[325] Several other targeted activists have been linked to Ablyazov by Kazakhstani authorities. In one extreme case, activist and blogger Murat Tungishbayev was unlawfully deported from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan in June 2018, despite having a pending asylum application in Kyrgyzstan.[326]

In **Kyrgyzstan**, there is less evidence of a systematic campaign. Four of the five cases included in Freedom House's count involved the targeting of ethnic Uzbeks who fled Kyrgyzstan following pogroms in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. They were detained on Kyrgyzstani requests in Russia in 2013 and 2014, but eventually released following legal challenges. The most recent case from Kyrgyzstan is that of the husband of a prominent anticorruption campaigner, who was detained at an airport in neighboring Kazakhstan, and immediately returned to Kyrgyzstan.[327]

> Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have all used physical transnational repression against exiles since 2014.

In terms of host countries, Russia features prominently: 51 of the 111 physical incidents documented in Eurasia (46 percent) occurred in Russia. Most detentions did not have a clear conclusion, or resulted eventually in the release of the exile after legal challenges.

Turkey is the other most important host country for the region, especially in terms of extreme incidents like assassinations and renditions. In the last six years, there have been assassinations of exiles from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and renditions of exiles from Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, within Turkey's borders. Turkmenistani and Tajikistani exiles have also experienced detentions at the origin country's request.

Middle East and North Africa

Two women look at the view from the terrace of a cafe in Istanbul as seagulls fly over them on September 10, 2019. Image credit: Ozan Kose/AFP via Getty Images.

Transnational repression is common in the Middle East and North Africa, which has the second-highest number of physical incidents in Freedom House's compilation, behind only Asia. **Turkey**, **Iran**, **Saudi Arabia**, **Bahrain**, **Egypt**, **Libya**, and the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** all had recorded physical incidents since 2014.

The one **Libyan** case identified during the time period under review was the son of former dictator Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi being rendered from Niger without due process. Dissidents from the other six countries that conduct physical transnational repression also face a constant stream of "everyday" transnational repression that includes coercion by proxy, digital threats, and spyware. All six countries have earned a reputation for harassing and detaining the family members of exiles as a tool of pressure.[328] Everyday tactics also include some of the boldest spyware development and deployment in the world, such as the UAE's alleged use of cell phone tracking in an attempt to locate and render a princess who fled the country,[329] and Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's remote hacking of dissidents' phones to record their conversations, movements, and activities.[330] In all six countries, mobility controls were also used to limit exiled dissidents' travel, or to isolate their family members within the country of origin.

Aside from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, which are examined in their own case studies, **Egypt** accounts for the vast majority of physical incidents in the region, with 42 physical incidents in the time period under review. Egypt's transnational repression campaign is tightly connected to its brutal domestic crackdown following the 2013 coup in which elected president Mohamed Morsi was ousted. Authorities have arrested tens of thousands within Egypt and have pursued dissidents abroad, especially those connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been outlawed in Egypt as a terrorist organization.

In terms of tactics, the government has conducted renditions of 16 individuals from Malaysia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Lebanon. In all of these cases local law enforcement appears to have cooperated with Egyptian authorities, detaining people at

Egypt's request and then transferring them within hours or days into Egyptian custody with only the barest fig leaf of a bureaucratic process, and without any opportunity to challenge their detention or deportation. Malaysia and Kuwait were mass cases, in which authorities transferred four and eight individuals, respectively, at the same time.[331] In the case of Kuwait, at least one of the men was handed over on the basis of a conviction for participating in a protest in Egypt in 2016, even though he had not been in the country during that time.[332]

Egypt's pursuit has sometimes reached exiles in countries that do not support the government's ongoing crackdown. In January 2019, Mohamed Abdelhafiz was deported from an airport in Turkey to Egypt, allegedly after arriving in the country without an appropriate visa. Authorities in Turkey, which has supported the Muslim Brotherhood in exile and hosts thousands of its members, suspended eight police officers and opened an investigation into the deportation.[333]

Interpol abuse has also been a feature of regional governments' pursuit of dissidents abroad: authorities in Bahrain, Egypt, the UAE, Turkey, and Iran have all abused Interpol to detain opponents. Mohamed Mahsoub, an Egyptian opposition politician, was detained in Italy in August 2018 on the basis of an Interpol Red Notice; he was released after one day in detention.[334] Turkey detained television presenter Hisham Abdullah under similar circumstances in December 2018.[335]

Other countries in the region are also engaged in campaigns of transnational repression. Officials in **Bahrain** famously used Interpol to have soccer player Hakeem al-Araibi, who had fled the country and become a refugee in Australia, detained in Thailand in November 2018. He was held for 76 days and released only after an international outcry.[336]

> Egypt accounts for 42 physical incidents in the time period under review.

It is quite possible that the scale of renditions and unlawful deportations between countries in the Gulf region, in particular, is even larger than discussed here. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regional cooperation mechanism includes a 2004 antiterrorism agreement, a 2012 joint security agreement, and a series of handwritten agreements signed in 2013 and 2014.[337] Taken together, the agreements oblige the members of the GCC—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE—to cooperate against terrorist threats, but also critics of their respective regimes. Documented renditions between these states appear extremely informal; in the absence of any legal transparency, it is possible that more transfers take place without any external knowledge.

Latin America

Venezuelan opposition student leader, Lorent Gomez Saleh, hugs a friend after holding a press conference in Madrid on October 23, 2018. Image credit: Oscar Del Pozo/AFP via Getty Images.

Transnational repression appears relatively rare in Latin America compared to other regions, although it is possible that the phenomenon is less visible due to the region's enormous humanitarian crises, including the international displacement of millions of people due to political repression, organized crime, and natural disasters. Several extreme cases emerged from the brutal political crackdowns in Nicaragua and Venezuela, but unlike in other parts of the world, these do not appear to be part of broader campaigns of transnational repression.

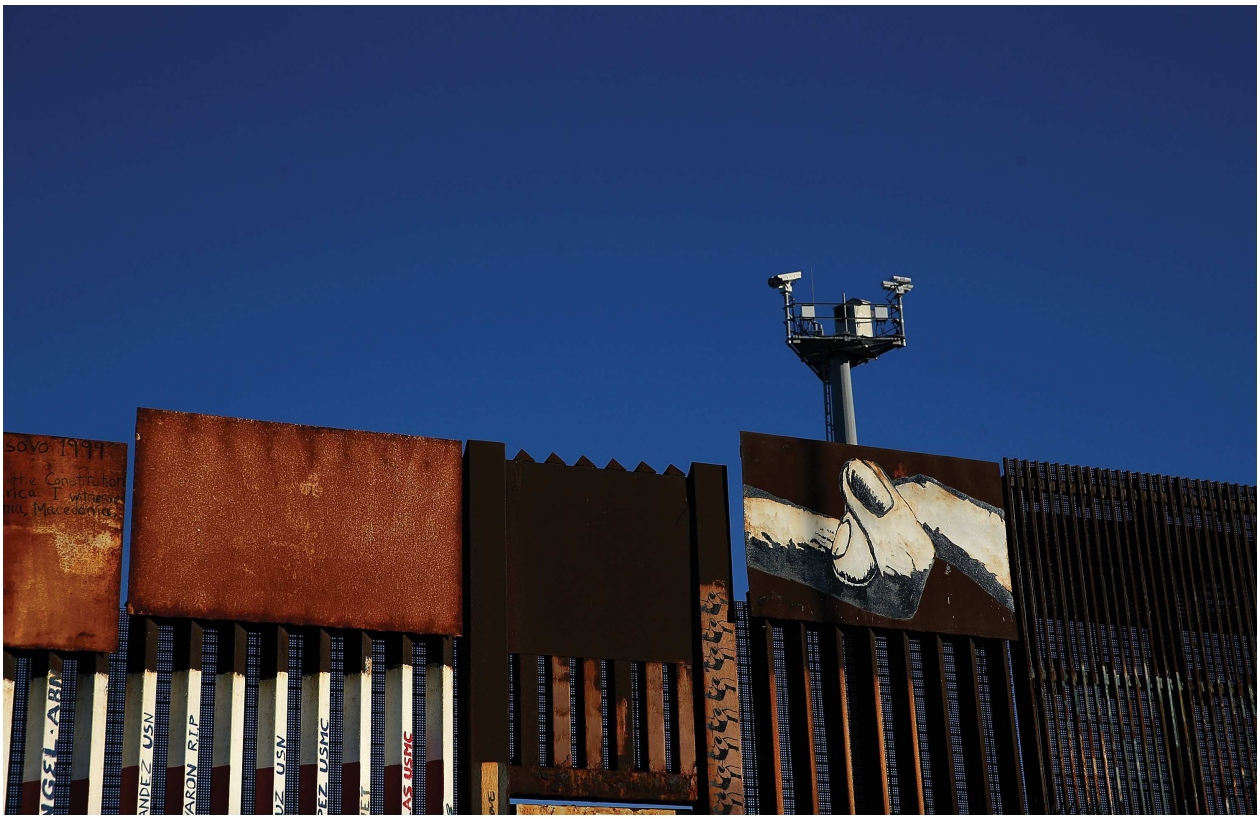
In the case of **Nicaragua**, the military has pursued across borders ex-contras who participated in the 2018 nationwide protests against the government. A local human rights organization documented what appears to be the Nicaraguan military's targeted killing of three such men in Honduras near the border in June and July 2019.[338] Exiled journalist Winston Potosme experienced an extreme form of coercion by proxy in April 2020, when men broke into his family's home in Nicaragua and assaulted his father, and then sent Potosme threatening messages from his father's phone.[339] The Nicaraguan government has been mentioned as a customer of the notorious commercial surveillance company NSO Group, but Freedom House did not find reports of the software's deployment by the government outside Nicaragua.[340]

Venezuelan authorities have shown signs of trying to pursue exiles abroad, but with diminishing success. In 2014, the government was able to have two opposition leaders, Lorent Gómez Saleh and Gabriel Valles Sguerzi, unlawfully deported from neighboring Colombia.[341] They spent four years in prison. Since then, the regime has not succeeded in having other dissidents brought back to the country or detained at the government's request. This is despite attempts in some cases to have Interpol issue notices issued against individuals.

The Venezuelan government has used mobility controls, cancelling the passports of dissidents within the country, sometimes as they are attempting to leave.[342] There is some evidence that the government has forced exiles to record videos "thanking" Venezuelan authorities when they renew passports abroad.[343]

Despite its long history of aggressive international espionage, especially against the large Cuban community in the United States, Freedom House found an absence of clear cases of transnational repression emanating from **Cuba**. Mobility controls, especially control over the ability to exit Cuba, have long been a tool of the regime; in a trend illustrating something of the inverse, dissidents are sometimes forced into exile after they emerge from prison, taken by authorities directly to the airport and flown off to Europe or elsewhere.[344] Under the Trump administration, the US government showed renewed concern about espionage and recruitment among exiles.[345] However, Freedom House research did not find cases of physical transnational attacks on Cuban exiles by the Cuban government in the time period under review.

Recommendations



Surveillance cameras stand above the US-Mexican border fence in Tijuana, Mexico in January 2017. Image credit: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images.

Acts of transnational repression can be difficult to prevent. Obstacles to countering this alarming phenomenon are embedded in larger issues of authoritarian influence in democracies, as well as in refugee policies, law enforcement engagement with vulnerable communities, the export of spyware, and limits on the enforcement of sanctions.

The recommendations listed below are intended to **constrain the ability of states to commit acts of transnational repression and to increase accountability for perpetrators of transnational repression**. Reducing opportunities for authoritarian states to manipulate institutions within democracies will make it harder for them to target exiles and diasporas. Consistent accountability will moreover raise the cost of transnational repression for perpetrators.

Recommendations for the United States

Executive Branch

Deploy a robust strategy for the use of targeted sanctions against perpetrators of transnational repression and those facilitating such acts. Targeted sanctions against rights violators, such as denying or revoking visas for entry to the United States, or freezing US-based assets, enjoy broad bipartisan support. Existing US law allows for targeted sanctions on individuals (including both government officials and private citizens) and entities involved in a variety of crimes, including serious human rights abuses and corruption. In some cases, the family members of perpetrators are also eligible for sanction. A robust sanctions strategy that pays special attention to perpetrators of transnational repression and those who enable them would

play a key role in raising the cost of transnational repression. The Biden administration should:

- **Impose targeted sanctions on perpetrators and enablers of acts of transnational repression that fall within the bounds of existing law.** Current law allows sanctions on perpetrators of serious human rights abuses and those who assist them, including for abuses such as assassinations and renditions, which are some of the most serious forms of transnational repression. In many cases, transnational repression operations are carried out by specific units of intelligence agencies. The individuals directing these units to act, the units themselves, and the individual members of these units should be sanctioned.
- **Work with Congress to ensure robust funding for enforcement of targeted sanctions.** The US Department of the Treasury, Department of State, and Department of Justice all collect information about suspected perpetrators of abuses eligible for sanction. Unfortunately, the number of potential sanctions cases to be vetted by the US government far exceeds current capacity. The US Congress has provided modest dedicated funding for sanctions enforcement, but funding for additional staff would be useful in reducing the existing backlog. The Biden administration should direct senior staff at each relevant agency to make the implementation of targeted sanctions a key priority and should ensure the president's budget requests include the funding levels required for robust enforcement.

Ensure the United States maintains a robust refugee resettlement program to protect victims of transnational repression and others fleeing persecution. As Congress noted in the creation of the Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980, "it is the historic policy of the United States to respond to the urgent needs of persons subject to persecution in their homelands." Many refugees fled political persecution in countries that engage in transnational repression, and face threats even after resettlement. Refugees who live in strong democracies where the rule of law is upheld and institutions are accountable have stronger basic protection against transnational repression than those who do not. With this in mind, the Biden administration should:

- **Commit to rebuilding the country's resettlement program back to historical levels and work with Congress to provide adequate funding for this purpose.** Each year, the president and Congress work together to set an annual cap on the number of allowable refugee admissions for that year, with a high of 207,116 in 1980, a low of 22,517 in 2018, and an average annual acceptance rate of 77,561. The Biden administration should uphold the United States' historical position on refugee admittance, which rightly seeks to protect those who need protection, by working with Congress to welcome as many refugees as possible.
- **Revoke the president's September 2019 executive order permitting states and localities to prevent resettlement.**
- **Ensure transparent admittance criteria that do not discriminate inappropriately, such as on the basis of race or religion.**

When reviewing export licensing applications, give extra scrutiny to applications for companies exporting products to countries rated as Not Free or Partly Free by Freedom House. In October of 2020, the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BiS) updated its licensing policy to restrict the export of items if there is "a risk that the items will be used to violate or abuse human rights" (15 C.F.R. §742.7(b)). In applying this updated policy, the Biden administration should consult research by Freedom House and other credible human rights organizations to determine whether there is a risk of human rights abuse, including transnational repression, for exported items. Particular caution in granting applications should be applied for products being exported to countries rated by Freedom House as Partly Free or Not Free. Nearly all perpetrators of transnational repression are countries with these ratings.

Ensure that personnel of the US State Department and other relevant agencies, stationed both in the United States and overseas, are trained to recognize and address transnational repression. US diplomats and personnel can play a key role in protecting exiles who are targeted. Timely diplomatic intervention, whether public or private, in isolation or in coordination with other states, can be the difference between an unlawful deportation and freedom for a targeted individual. The State Department should:

- **Add training on identifying transnational repression threats, and on the relevant laws that can be invoked to combat them.** Like those on human trafficking and other key issues, training programs would help US officials recognize and mitigate the threat of transnational repression when they encounter them in the course of their jobs.

- **Ensure that there is full and consistent reporting on transnational repression in the State Department country reports.** Since 2019, US State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices have included a section on "Politically Motivated Reprisals against Individuals Located outside the Country." Strengthening and making consistent this section of the reports would help create a more robust record of transnational repression and encourage greater awareness of the problem.

Combat Interpol abuse. Interpol abuse—in which governments take advantage of the lack of due process protections within the International Criminal Police Organization's notification system to have targets spuriously detained or extradited—is a serious threat in the United States. US law enforcement agencies, including immigration enforcement, sometimes detain individuals based on notices from countries without independent judiciaries, subjecting them to extended detention without adequate cause. To combat Interpol abuse, the Biden administration should:

- **Issue clear guidance establishing that Interpol notices are not equivalent to arrest warrants under US law,** and may not be used as the sole basis for detention or deprivation of services in the United States.
- **Apply the voice and vote of the US government within Interpol to establish due process reforms and increase transparency.** The United States is by far the largest statutory contributor to Interpol's budget, and should leverage its contributions alongside other democracies to improve the functioning of Interpol and reduce opportunities for abuse.

Release the CIA's assessment of the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. Releasing an unclassified version of the CIA's assessment that names perpetrators would help establish accountability for the most famous case of transnational repression in recent years.

Congress

Ensure strong targeted sanctions laws and sufficient funding for enforcement. With robust bipartisan support, Congress has played a crucial role in ensuring the successful implementation of US sanctions programs that target human rights violators. Several key steps by Congress could make existing programs even stronger, particularly with respect to accountability for perpetrators of transnational repression:

- **Reauthorize the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act** (22 USC 2656 note), which allows for visa bans and asset freezes on individuals and entities engaged in human rights abuses and corruption. It will sunset on December 23, 2022 without reauthorization.
- **Codify Executive Order 13818,** which expands on the Global Magnitsky Act and other country-specific sanctions programs focused on human rights abuses and corruption. This would enable the United States to impose sanctions for serious human rights abuses, a term which encompasses a greater number of abuses than the more restrictive threshold of gross violations of human rights – the standard included in the Global Magnitsky Act in its original form.
- **Work with relevant agencies to ensure offices dealing with sanctions are fully funded.** Congressional appropriators have already been consulting with agencies on the funding levels necessary for sanctions enforcement, and Congress has provided modest dedicated funding for these activities. However, agency staff continue to report that the number of cases to be vetted for possible sanction far exceeds current capacity. Congress should support funding for additional personnel in relevant sanctions offices in order to ensure the executive branch has adequate capacity to implement sanctions policies.

Restrict security assistance for states engaging in transnational repression. Section 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (22 USC 2304), is intended to "promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms throughout the world" by making the observance of human rights a "principal goal of US foreign policy." Current law prohibits the provision of security assistance to any government engaging "in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights" unless the president certifies to Congress that "extraordinary circumstances" warrant the provision of assistance. This section should be updated to allow the restriction of security assistance for states consistently engaging in acts of transnational repression. This would serve the dual purpose of limiting an aggressor government's resources for engaging in transnational repression while also sending a strong signal that the behavior is unacceptable. Congress should work with the executive branch and subject matter experts to determine whether this should be done by adding "acts of transnational repression" as a new, standalone category for which aid could be restricted, or whether the definition of gross violations of human rights, as defined in 22 USC 2304(d)(1)), should itself be updated.

Work with the Department of Justice and other relevant agencies to update transparency laws regarding individuals acting on behalf of foreign governments. A critical step in curbing transnational repression is recognizing the specific actors committing transnational abuses on behalf of their home governments. In the United States, antiquated procedures for regulation of foreign agents under the Foreign Agent Registrations Act of 1938 (22 USC 611 et seq) are a major obstacle to identifying those acting on behalf of repressive regimes. Although the Department of Justice has ramped up enforcement in recent years, the law remains outdated and does not address the realities of modern-day foreign influence activities. The absence of effective regulation in this area makes it harder than it should be to distinguish legal activity on behalf of a foreign power or entity from illegal activity, and thus to address transnational repression threats before they escalate. Congress should closely consult civil society groups to mitigate unintended consequences in any update, such as US-based organizations being required to register as foreign agents simply because they receive portions of their funding from non-US sources. When determining the types of influence activities that are or are not permissible, and the penalties for violation, it may be most appropriate to draft new laws rather than expand existing foreign agent statutes, since these statutes are intended to provide transparency about who is acting on behalf of a foreign government and are not intended to penalize malign behavior.

Work closely with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), US Department of Justice, and other relevant agencies to determine what additional authorities should be added to US criminal law to more effectively apprehend and prosecute perpetrators of transnational repression. Many types of transnational repression, notably harassment in which an aggressor located outside the United States is spying on US-based exiles without posing a physical threat, do not fall neatly within the confines of existing law. This makes it more difficult for law enforcement agents to assist victims and apprehend perpetrators. Rather than prosecuting such acts of repression directly, law enforcement and prosecutors are often forced to seek charges against perpetrators for other offenses—such as failure to disclose activities on behalf of a foreign agent, stalking, conspiracy against rights, wire fraud, or obstruction of justice—that do not include all perpetrators or crimes. Congress should:

- **Examine the domestic utility of and international experience with laws criminalizing "refugee espionage."** Spying on refugees, a common tactic of transnational repression, is not directly criminalized in the United States. In a number of Nordic and Western European countries, spying on refugees is either explicitly criminalized as "refugee espionage" or clearly incorporated into general espionage provisions. In the United States, however, espionage is narrowly defined as the collection or distribution of sensitive defense information. A new statute addressing "refugee espionage" or similar activities might help law enforcement address transnational repression. Study of this issue should include any possible negative spillover effects for refugees and migrants themselves.

Combat Interpol abuse. Interpol abuse—in which governments take advantage of the lack of due process protections within the International Criminal Police Organization's notification system to have targets spuriously detained or extradited—is a serious threat in the United States. Local law enforcement agencies, including immigration enforcement, still detain individuals based on notices, subjecting them to extended detention without cause, despite a lack of due process before Interpol shares notices with member states. To combat Interpol abuse, Congress should:

- **Pass S. 2483, the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention (TRAP) Act,** which affirms guidance concerning the limited role of Interpol notifications in the US legal system; applies the voice and vote of the US government within Interpol to establish due process reforms and increase transparency; and requires reporting from the Office of the Attorney General on Interpol abuse.

Law enforcement

Establish standardized outreach procedures for vulnerable communities, which can be customized in language for each field office or area of operation depending on the exile community to be reached. The FBI conducts proactive messaging on a variety of issues to increase community awareness of illegal activities, and encourages victims to report any unlawful activity to appropriate law enforcement authorities. Outreach on transnational repression is occurring in a number of communities already, and should be widened. State and local law enforcement should conduct similar outreach as appropriate, and federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies should continue

to work jointly to investigate leads and information tips to address transnational repression in the United States. Many victims of transnational repression come from countries in which some law enforcement officials were involved in perpetrating abuses on behalf of the state. Building trust with targeted communities is critical to addressing transnational repression threats before they escalate. Communities that understand how law enforcement can protect them, and that outreach to law enforcement will not result in negative consequences for the community, are more resilient to coercion and surveillance.

Provide proactive law enforcement training on transnational repression to better assist its victims and apprehend its perpetrators. Law enforcement officers should receive instruction on transnational repression to better identify signs of it during their work. Similar to what has been done to combat human trafficking in recent years, training in transnational repression threats should be incorporated into a variety of curriculums for law enforcement officers at the federal, state and local levels.

- **The FBI should offer training at a variety of levels throughout an agent's or analyst's career.** Initial training for new agents and analysts is already quite extensive. Rather than adding a complex topic like transnational repression to an already rigorous set of courses, training could be offered once personnel receive their job assignments and are more acclimated to their jobs. Briefings and enterprise-wide instruction on transnational repression should be developed by personnel responsible for international human rights, counterintelligence, and cyber issues to conduct tailored victim outreach and enable the Bureau to address transnational repression in a comprehensive fashion.
- **The FBI should also include training on transnational repression for national and international law enforcement officers receiving training at the National Academy, and for business and community leaders completing the Citizens Academy.** The FBI's National Academy offers professional training for national and international law enforcement officers in management positions. Its Citizens' Academy, which offers trainings to community leaders in order to teach them about the FBI and its work, could be used to reach non-FBI members of the community.
- **Training on transnational repression should also be offered at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC).** Federal law enforcement officers, including personnel for the Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security and other who may encounter perpetrators or victims of transnational repression receive training at FLETC. They should receive the training necessary to enable them to identify victims and perpetrators and refer to other agencies or officials when necessary.
- **Incorporate training into existing joint task forces that bring together federal, state and local law enforcement officers.** In many situations, local law enforcement may be the first to hear about a threat against a diaspora community in the United States, but may not know the scope of the problem or about existing tools to address it. Providing training in identifying transnational repression threats to existing task forces that bring members of federal, state, and local law enforcement bodies together could encourage an general awareness of the threat and result in more effective responses to it.

Recommendations for other democracies

- **Impose targeted sanctions on perpetrators of serious human rights violations through transnational repression.** "Magnitsky Acts" provide a mechanism for travel bans and asset freezes for serious human rights violations. Imposing sanctions in particular for crimes of transnational repression would send a strong signal that perpetrators will be held accountable. Countries that possess Magnitsky laws should fully enforce them, countries that lack such legal authorities should enact them.
- **Strengthen refugee resettlement programs, including by increasing quotas for accepting refugees and streamlining resettlement procedures.** Allowing countries like Turkey and Thailand to become bottlenecks, where large numbers of asylum seekers are forced to wait for years for resettlement to a safe third country, encourages targeting in those countries.
- **Increase outreach to communities within democracies known to be targets for transnational repression.** Engagement with communities on this topic should not be a component of countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts. Although both require building community trust, the source of threat in these two areas is

quite different, and authorities should distinguish between surveillance and coercion threats from foreign agents, and proselytization and recruitment threats from extremists.

- **Restrict the export of censorship and surveillance technology.** Given the significant potential for abuse, trade in censorship and surveillance technologies should be restricted, particularly for end users that are known to have committed human rights violations.
- **Require businesses exporting dual-use technologies to report annually on the impacts of their exports.** Reports should include a list of countries to which they have exported such technologies, potential human rights concerns in each of those countries, a summary of pre-export due diligence undertaken by businesses to ensure their products are not misused, any human rights violations that have occurred as a result of the use or potential use of their technologies, and any efforts undertaken to mitigate the harm done and prevent future abuses. Further, any official government export guidance should urge businesses to exercise caution and adhere to international principles on business and human rights when exporting dual-use technologies to countries rated Partly Free or Not Free by Freedom House.

Recommendations for civil society

- **Invest in "digital hygiene" trainings among targeted communities, reaching beyond professional activist and journalism circles.** The networked nature of digital organizing and digital communications means that penetration at one point can affect an entire community. Where the community includes refugees, digital hygiene should be integrated into refugee resettlement programs.
- **Increase engagement with law enforcement institutions that may encounter transnational repression in their work.** Civil society organizations should provide briefings, educational introductions, and outreach to law enforcement institutions in order to help them better understand the problem.
- **Expand research into the consequences of transnational repression for targeted communities, and for host countries where they live, and disseminate findings among policymakers and targeted communities alike.** Greater knowledge of the issue will encourage more effective and creative policymaking.

About the Project

Freedom House Director of Research Strategy Nate Schenkkan led the project. Schenkkan and Research Analyst Isabel Linzer wrote the final report. Research Assistant Tessa Weal and interns Joy Hammer and Reema Saleh provided research assistance. Freedom House Research Director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan Sarah Cook contributed research on China. Consultants Emile Dirks, Amy Lin, and Mustafa Aksu (Uyghur Human Rights Project) contributed research on China.

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In addition to interviews and literature review, for this project Freedom House compiled and coded 608 cases in which states assassinated, rendered, assaulted, physically intimidated, or had detained individuals who had left those states and resided abroad. The data collection and coding methods can be viewed at https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/about-acknowledgements. Data is available on request from Freedom House through the research@freedomhouse.org email account. Please use the subject line "Transnational Repression Data Request."

This project originated with a workshop on transnational repression organized by Edward Lemon at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University in May 2018. At this workshop, we first conceived the idea of a global study of the scope and scale of transnational repression to expand upon the work done by John Heathershaw, Saipira Furstenberg, and Edward Lemon through their Central Asia Political Exiles (CAPE) database at the University of Exeter. The CAPE database continued to be a touchstone for the project throughout our work. Freedom House especially thanks John Heathershaw and Saipira Furstenberg for kindly hosting us for two days of workshops on the project at the University of Exeter in February 2020. These workshops were invaluable for developing our ideas and framework for discussing transnational repression in the final report.

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Endnotes

[1] Freedom House coded all incidents on a 0–3 scale of confidence regarding (a) the source of information and (b) the likelihood that the incident was sponsored by a state. Incidents that scored a 0 on either of these measures were excluded from the count. Attribution of some incidents, especially assassinations and unexplained disappearances, can be difficult.

[2] For the purposes of this analysis, Freedom House excluded cases of "pushbacks," in which the receiving country returned a migrant without due process, but without the explicit involvement of the migrant's origin country. While pushbacks are serious human rights violations, they do not fall within the scope of this report. For the full methodology, see https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/about-acknowledgements.

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