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RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières (Author)

Journalists' families increasingly targeted with intimidation tactics by repressive regimes

From China to Azerbaijan, Iran to Guinea, authorities around the world are targeting journalists' loved ones to exert pressure on them. Threats, arrests, kidnappings, raids, administrative pressure and sexual blackmail — these are the intimidation tactics that the relatives of some media professionals are forced to endure. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is sounding the alarm.

"*When it comes to preventing independent voices from informing the public, press freedom predators are no longer satisfied with attacking journalists alone and are now targeting their relatives, too. These despicable intimidation tactics have been observed in several countries: Iran, China, Azerbaijan, El Salvador, as well as in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories, regardless of whether journalists are working in their home country or in exile. These repressive strategies are infamous methods of terror.*

Anne Bocandé
RSF Editorial Director

Threats, arrests, kidnappings, raids, administrative pressure and sexual blackmail — in many countries, this is what the families of persecuted journalists are subjected to by authorities in order to maintain pressure on — and silence — journalists.

- **Threats and intimidation**

Every single Iranian journalist in exile supported by RSF's assistance office since 2024 — nearly 60 people in total — has reported pressure being exerted on their family members who remain in Iran. As part of "Watch out because we're coming for you" — RSF's report on the transnational

repression of Iranian reporters working in the United Kingdom — 60% of respondents said their families had been threatened or intimidated.

In Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, the families of Ukrainian journalists who are either detained or living in unoccupied areas are regularly threatened and fear speaking out publicly. As someone close to a detained Ukrainian journalist describes: "FSB agents [Russia's Federal Security Service] can come to the homes of our loved ones in currently occupied territories, seize their computer equipment, question them or simply threaten them. At the very worst, they can take a member of our family away." Another anonymous source also reported threats directed towards the partner of a reporter arrested in an occupied zone of Ukraine.

- **Targeted and killed in Gaza**

One of the most emblematic examples of journalists' families being persecuted in Gaza involves the head of the Gaza desk of the Qatari outlet *Al Jazeera*, **Waël Dahdouh** – who was wounded in Khan Younis, in the south of the Strip, by an Israeli strike on 15 December 2023, which killed his colleague **Samer Abu Daqqa**. On 7 January 2024, his son, **Hamza Dahdouh**, an *Al Jazeera* reporter, was killed by a strike on his car in Rafah, in the south of the Gaza Strip. His wife, two of his children, one of his grandchildren and eight other loved ones were also killed a few months earlier, in October 2023, by a strike on the house where they had taken refuge in the Nuseirat camp, in the centre of the Strip.

- **Arrests and kidnappings**

In Pakistan, in March 2025, around twenty armed men stormed the family home of **Ahmad Noorani**, founder of the investigative website *Fact Focus*, who was already in exile in the United States. The incident took place shortly after his investigation into the nepotism of Pakistan's army chief of staff was published. After confiscating their phones, the armed men abducted his two brothers, who were eventually released a month later.

In China, the arrest and enforced disappearance of relatives of Uyghur journalists in exile is commonplace, particularly when they work for international media outlets like *Radio Free Asia* (*RFA*) and *Voice of America* (*VOA*). Both of these outlets, which are funded by the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM), narrowly avoided closure in 2025 after President Trump's administration attempted to dismantle them. This phenomenon is far from new. Two of *RFA*'s editor-in-chief **Eset Sulaiman's brothers** were declared missing before the Chinese authorities confirmed they had been in detention since 2018 in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. According to the journalist, five of his cousins have also gone

missing, including four who were sentenced to 17 years in prison for acts described as "religious extremism" after a closed trial.

A few years later, in 2024, a former *VOA* journalist, **Kasim Abdurehim Kashgar**, told RSF that his friend Mirkamil Ahmed had been sentenced to nine years in prison. Four of his former colleagues were sentenced to seven years behind bars on obscure charges, after he left for the United States in 2017 and refused to give in to pressure to stop his journalism. The following year, the family of his colleague from *RFA*'s Uyghur service, **Gulchehra Hoja**, was also targeted. "In February 2018, I learnt that 25 of my direct relatives had been taken to the so-called re-education camps. Additionally, 50 family members of six journalists from our radio station had been kidnapped," she reported in an interview with RSF in May 2025.

In other countries, arrests or abductions of relatives are also becoming tools of intimidation. In Guinea, **Mamoudou Babila Keita**, administrator of the *Inquisiteur.net* website — who has been in exile since 2024 — fled his country after an attempted kidnapping, before learning his own father had been kidnapped from his home on 29 September 2025. According to the journalist, he was kidnapped by the Guinean transitional authorities. His father has not been found since. This act appears to be a retaliatory one linked to his son's work.

In El Salvador, the father of **Carolina Amaya**, director of the investigative outlet *Mala Yerba*, was arrested in 2023, the day her investigation establishing a link between President Nayib Bukele's close circle and the destruction of an ecosystem was published. He was then detained for ten months, while the journalist faced legal proceedings and threats.

In Iran, radio host **Sajjad Shahrabi**, brother of **Shima Shahrabi**, editor-in-chief of the Persian-language news website *IranWire*, was arrested in 2023 by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence. He spent 37 days in Evin prison in the Iranian capital, Tehran, before being released on bail. Several other family members were summoned and questioned about his work and that of this media outlet in exile, while some of their property was seized.

- **Raids, confiscations and restrictions**

In Vietnam, the relatives of independent journalist **Doan Bao Chau** — forced into hiding after being charged with "disseminating anti-state documents" — have been subjected to repeated searches and summonses since 2024. His wife is regularly questioned about his whereabouts.

In recent years, reprisals against journalists' relatives have taken on a systematic nature in Tajikistan, as illustrated by the case of **Muhamadjon Kabirov**, the founder of the online television channel *Azda TV.* In 2024 he attempted to bring his father to Poland, where he had taken refuge. At the

airport, the authorities revoked his father's passport and driving licence. Placed under house arrest, he is now strictly forbidden from communicating with his son. Previously, the authorities had confiscated all the family's assets, including land, agricultural equipment, Kabirov's apartment, and property registered in his mother's name. Other relatives of the editorial team experienced similar intimidation the same year.

- **Surveillance, theft and harassment**

Surveillance is also fuelling a climate of mistrust and insecurity. In the state of Guerrero in Mexico, around fifteen journalists and their relatives were forced to flee to escape surveillance, intrusions of their homes and theft. In a climate marked by collusion between local authorities and organised crime groups, they were also victims of online identity theft.

In Nicaragua, loved ones of journalists in exile are subject to constant surveillance with patrols and motorbikes circling around their homes, threats of imprisonment and repeated questioning. These are compounded by coercive administrative measures, such as a refusal to issue passports and the freezing of bank accounts. Some families have even seen their homes set ablaze. Recent first-hand accounts report fake agents presenting themselves at family homes, pressure and hacking attempts designed to locate exiled journalists.

Relatives of journalists in exile are also subjected to various forms of harassment in El Salvador. According to RSF information gathered with the support of partner organisations, police officers visit their homes under various pretexts — accusations of domestic violence, road accidents or suspicions of "illicit association" — to question families or inspect homes. In 2025, the family of one journalist was visited several times by police officers, while another loved one was detained during a migration check due to an unclear criminal alert, considered by sources consulted to be a measure of intimidation.

- **Sexual blackmail**

In Azerbaijan, the authorities resort to sexual blackmail and reprisals against journalists' families, even when they are in exile. Blogger **Mahammad Mirzali**, who has been living in France since 2016, has experienced this. In an attempt to exert pressure on him — he notably posts videos criticising the authorities on his YouTube channel *Made in Azerbaijan* — his father and brother-in-law were arrested in 2017. In March 2024, several intimate videos featuring one of his sisters were sent to members of his family and circulated on a Telegram channel — a well-established intimidation tactic used by the regime in the country's capital, Baku.

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