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Treatment by the authorities of family members of dissidents residing abroad

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Summary

Because regime officials view opposition groups and individuals as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic, repressing dissidents abroad is a primary goal of Iran's intelligence agencies. Iranian intelligence operations abroad focus on monitoring dissidents, preventing them from gaining the wider public's attention, severing ties between activists and their acquaintances in Iran and placing exiled dissidents under their indirect control. Since the start of the Mahsa Amini protests in the autumn of 2022, threat levels against Iranian diaspora members have increased.

Besides directly targeting the exile community with cyber espionage, harassment, intimidation, abductions and attacks, the Islamic Republic engages in proxy punishment, in the form of the abuse of family members in Iran as a means to manipulate and subjugate dissidents outside its borders. The Iranian authorities frequently use this method against dissidents with a public profile, as it is an easy and inexpensive method to suppress dissent and instil fear in diaspora communities. The harassment of family members tends to escalate at times of tension inside the country and increased visibility for Iran on the global stage, such as when the country saw nationwide protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, and around significant protest anniversaries. Cases of proxy punishment are underreported due to victims' fear of further escalation.

Iranian authorities target family members of dissidents living abroad with various degrees of intimidation and harassment, including persistent phone calls or in-person visits, surveillance, summonses, interrogations, threats, economic penalties such as job or pension loss and asset freezes, travel bans and passport confiscations, as well as arrests, criminal prosecution and detention in more severe cases. Phone calls and summoning family members to security offices are the most common. The authorities can escalate the pressure when a dissident continues his or her activities. However, it is also reported that in many cases they prefer to keep the pressure subtle.

Regarding which category of dissidents in exile the Islamic Republic targets with the proxy punishment method, it is widely reported that the regime routinely targets exiled Persian-language journalists' family members. Family members of support staff working for Persian-language media organisations are also sometimes targeted.

Dissidents with a notable public profile or who speak out in public –addressing audiences inside Iran or international human rights organisations and foreign policymakers, including on social media, risk being targeted with proxy punishment. According to one expert consulted, the regime focuses on dissidents who have organizational ties with political groups, high-profile or influential political and human rights activists and regime-critical social media influencers with large followings. Another expert, however, emphasises that Iran's use of repression against family members of dissidents abroad is arbitrary by nature in order to create uncertainty and instil the fear among all dissident diaspora members that something might happen to their family members. The majority of the cases of proxy punishment that Cedoca found in the consulted sources can be categorised as dissidents affiliated to political groups, high-profile or influential political and human rights activists and regime-critical social media influencers with large followings or dissidents who appear in the media. There are also some reports of anti-regime protesters' and Christians' families being targeted in Iran.

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List of abbreviations

ABC	American Broadcasting Company
AI	Amnesty International
BfV	Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CSW	Christian Solidarity Worldwide
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
FAZ	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
FH	Freedom House
FIS	Federal Intelligence Service
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IRB	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Landinfo	Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre
MEC	Middle East Concern
MEK	Mujahedeen-e Khalq
MKO	Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization
PMOI	People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran
PJAK	Free Life Party of Kurdistan
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
SRC	Swiss Refugee Council
SRF	Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen
UK	United Kingdom
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
USDOS	United States Department of State
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
VOA	Voice of America

Introduction

This COI Focus investigates how the Iranian authorities treat Iran-based family members of Iranian dissidents living abroad. Cedoca focused on the period 2021-2024 and conducted the research between 19 August and 23 September 2024.

The first chapter discusses why and how the Iranian intelligence agencies engage in transnational repression, as well as who they target. The second chapter elaborates on the practice of targeting relatives, called proxy punishment, and Iran's use of this particular method of transnational repression. The third chapter looks into the scale of Iran's targeting of exiled dissidents' relatives in Iran. In the fourth chapter, Cedoca focuses on several diaspora categories – journalists, activists, protesters and Christians – and provides a non-exhaustive overview of cases of transnational repression by proxy punishment encountered in the consulted sources.. The fifth and final chapter discusses discernible patterns in Iran's targeting of exiled dissidents' relatives in Iran.

For this research, Cedoca contacted Dr Afrooz Maghzi, an Iranian lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany.¹ Cedoca also contacted a researcher on transnational repression with extensive experience regarding Iran, who wishes to remain anonymous due to security concerns. Furthermore, Cedoca consulted reports by nongovernmental human rights organisations, national governmental bodies and international organisations. Cedoca also searched Iranian and international news websites and search engines for information on the subject.

Cedoca notes that research on transnational repression by authoritarian regimes faces limitations. Intelligence operations are by their nature shrouded in secrecy,² making reliable, first-hand information scarce. Furthermore, incidents of transnational repression are likely underreported³ due to victims' possible self-censorship out of fear for retaliation.⁴

¹ Harvard Law School, s.d., [url](#)

² Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

³ Moss D. M., Michaelsen M., Kennedy G., 10/05/2022, p. 738, [url](#)

⁴ Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024; Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

1. Transnational repression by Iranian intelligence agencies

1.1. Objectives

Authoritarian regimes use transnational repression to track and punish dissenters abroad through surveillance, harassment, and violence.⁵

According to western intelligence bodies and analysts, Iran's intelligence agencies focus on repressing dissidents at home and abroad because regime officials view opposition groups and individuals as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic.⁶ According to Germany's domestic intelligence services, intimidating and neutralising opposition members and punishing those viewed as traitors are primary goals of Iran's intelligence services.⁷ Switzerland's Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) states in a 2023 report that the Iranian leadership finds it important "to identify and monitor individuals at home and abroad who they feel might pose a threat to the regime".⁸ Regarding Iran's approach to its diaspora community, the FIS writes:

"The Iranian intelligence services have long been conducting surveillance on nationals who have fled the country and who are deemed to be influential. Many of these refugees have been living in Europe, [...] for years or even decades."⁹

Similarly, the September 2023 *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran* by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs states the following:

"There are indications of active surveillance of the Iranian diaspora by the Iranian government. For instance, the [Dutch intelligence and counterterrorism services]¹⁰ refer to a range of intelligence and influencing activities, including the targeting of the Iranian diaspora in the Netherlands. [...] According to several sources, the political activities of people abroad who have certain links to Iran are monitored, because the Iranian authorities see them as a security risk."¹¹

Citing a 2018 and a 2020 study by researcher Marcus Michaelsen¹², the Swiss Refugee Council (SRC) and the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre (Landinfo) write that the main goals of Iranian intelligence operations abroad are to monitor dissidents, prevent activists from gaining the wider public's attention, sever ties between activists and their acquaintances in Iran and control dissidents in exile.¹³

1.2. Tactics

According to former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst Kenneth Katzman Iran's intelligence agencies are known to use a broad range of tactics:

⁵ Moss D. M., Michaelsen M., Kennedy G., 10/05/2022, p. 736, [url](#)

⁶ USIP (Katzman K.), 17/02/2023, [url](#); BfV, 18/06/2024 p. 63 [url](#); BfV, 20/06/2023, p. 296, [url](#); FIS - Switzerland, 26/06/2023, pp. 64, 66, [url](#); Ministry of Foreign Affairs - The Netherlands, 09/2023, p. 27, [url](#)

⁷ BfV, 18/06/2024 p. 63 [url](#)

⁸ FIS - Switzerland, 26/06/2023, p. 66, [url](#)

⁹ FIS - Switzerland, 26/06/2023, p. 64, [url](#)

¹⁰ Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst [General Intelligence and Security Service], Militaire Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst [Military Intelligence and Security Service] and Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid [National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security]

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs - The Netherlands, 09/2023, p. 27, [url](#)

¹² Senior researcher on transnational repression at Toronto University's Citizen Lab

¹³ Landinfo, 28/11/2022, p. 10, [url](#); SRC, 24/11/2023, pp. 4-6, [url](#)

“They glean a lot of information from online activities. [...] Agencies intercept electronic messages and scrub social media for criticism of the government. They also use traditional collection methods, including interrogations, wiretapping and trailing people. Agents often interview family, friends and co-workers of suspects.”¹⁴

In 2023, Iranian cyber espionage in Germany mainly focused on the Iranian exile community.¹⁵ The Iranian intelligence services are also known to engage in harassment and intimidation of opposition activists,¹⁶ abductions and attacks.¹⁷

1.3. Targets

Regarding the question of who the Iranian intelligence agencies track and target, Katzman notes the Iranian intelligence agencies are “are especially concerned with stifling organized opposition”:

“In Europe and abroad, the agencies track dissidents in exile, some of whom have networks in Iran that agitate against the government. Intelligence agencies have targeted a broad range of exiled oppositionists, including monarchists, Kurdish separatist groups, dissidents who defected from the Islamic regime, and the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK), a left-wing Islamist organization. They have also targeted individual activists and journalists, especially those involved in the Green Movement protests over the disputed 2009 presidential election as well as several subsequent rounds of unrest.

In Iran, agencies have a wide range of targets, from underground organizations to government employees suspected of opposing the regime. Dissent is widespread in Iran, but the agencies do not attempt to track every citizen. They tend to focus on organizations and networks, especially ones actively recruiting members and plotting against the government.

The agencies are particularly concerned about Arab, Kurdish and Baluch separatist groups. [...] Intelligence agencies also focus on labor unions, oil workers and bazaaris, or traditional merchants—groups that played a key role in fueling the 1979 revolution against the monarchy.”¹⁸

1.4. Impact of the Mahsa Amini protests

After the start of the protests related to the death of Mahsa Amini in the autumn of 2022, increased threat levels against Iranians in their respective countries of residence were reported by the intelligence services of Norway, Germany, Canada, Switzerland and Australia.¹⁹ For example, FIS noted that “Iranian surveillance of [...] diaspora communities may have been intensified yet again following the latest wave of protests”²⁰ and estimated “the activities of the Iranian intelligence services against the diaspora community are likely to increase further”.²¹

¹⁴ USIP (Katzman K.), 17/02/2023, [url](#)

¹⁵ BfV, 18/06/2024 p. 62 [url](#)

¹⁶ FIS - Switzerland, 26/06/2023, p. 64, [url](#)

¹⁷ FIS - Switzerland, 26/06/2023, p. 64, [url](#); BfV, 18/06/2024 p. 63 [url](#)

¹⁸ USIP (Katzman K.), 17/02/2023, [url](#)

¹⁹ DRC, 11/2023, p. 16, [url](#)

²⁰ FIS - Switzerland, 26/06/2023, p. 64, [url](#)

²¹ FIS - Switzerland, 26/06/2023, p. 30, [url](#)

2. Proxy punishment

Besides reaching across borders in order to subjugate their opponents in other states, authoritarian regimes also rely on proxy punishment, “a widespread [...] method in the transnational repression toolkit”, according to academic research by Moss,²² Michaelsen²³ and Kennedy.²⁴ These researchers define proxy punishment as “the abuse of family members at home as a means to manipulate and subjugate dissidents abroad”.²⁵

The proxy punishment method uses repression against diaspora members’ close contacts (most often their family members) at home as an indirect means to coerce and punish those who remain out of reach. The researchers note that proxy punishment is “far cheaper than attempting to reach activists who are protected by the institutions and security apparatuses of other states” and also “makes it easier for state actors to avoid international condemnation and sanctions, [...]”.²⁶

Analysing almost 250 interviews with diaspora activists from Iran, Syria, Egypt and Libya, the same researchers found that regimes deploy “five tactics against diaspora members’ non-activist families at home: harm and confinement, threats and harassment, forced participation in regime propaganda and slander, resource deprivation, and travel bans”.²⁷

The Islamic Republic of Iran harasses, arrests, and detains family members of Iranian journalists and human rights and political activists living abroad in an attempt to pressure and silence dissidents around the world, several sources report.²⁸

Iranian lawyer and human rights researcher Dr Afrooz Maghzi explains how the Islamic Republic employs different degrees of proxy punishment and aims to deter activism and coerce dissidents into spying or participating in government propaganda:

“Iranian authorities target family members of dissidents living abroad through various levels of intimidation and harassment. This often begins with persistent phone calls or in-person visits from security forces, summoning the family members to undisclosed locations for questioning. The harassment escalates to threats, such as implying the dissident's family may lose their job or face persecution. These threats can involve surveillance and questioning, ostensibly expressing concern about the dissident's safety, but in reality, they serve to instil fear and exert pressure on both the dissident and their relatives. In more severe cases, authorities may arrest family members as a means of leverage to silence the dissident abroad.

The primary aim of these tactics is to suppress dissent and instil fear among dissidents abroad by targeting their loved ones. The Iranian government seeks to prevent these individuals from engaging in political activism or raising awareness about human rights abuses by pressuring their families. These actions are designed to limit the influence of dissidents and deter them from speaking out against the regime on international platforms. In many cases, the state also attempts

²² Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, US

²³ The Law, Science, Technology, and Society (LSTS) Research Group, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

²⁴ Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, UK

²⁵ Moss D. M., Michaelsen M., Kennedy G., 10/05/2022, pp. 735-736, [url](#)

²⁶ Moss D. M., Michaelsen M., Kennedy G., 10/05/2022, p. 737, [url](#)

²⁷ Moss D. M., Michaelsen M., Kennedy G., 10/05/2022, p. 735, [url](#)

²⁸ Landinfo, 28/11/2022, p. 10, [url](#); IranWire (Shams O.), 04/07/2023, [url](#); IranWire, 21/06/2023, [url](#); The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#); Rijksoverheid Nederland - Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 09/2023, pp. 39-40, [url](#); AI, 29/03/2022, [url](#)

to coerce these dissidents into cooperating with them, either to spy on other exiled dissidents or to participate in government propaganda efforts on international platforms.”²⁹

The researcher on transnational repression similarly explains that in order to pressure dissidents abroad, Iranian authorities use a wide array of actions against family members in Iran, ranging from house visits during which they ask the family about the dissident’s activities abroad or instruct the family to tell their relative “to behave”, to arrests, interrogations and prolonged detention. Family members can also lose their jobs or be prohibited to work in certain sectors. Usually the authorities start with a visit or a short interrogation and increase the pressure if the dissident abroad continues his or her activities.³⁰

The September 2023 *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran* by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs states:

“Journalists, opposition media and critical voices operating from abroad are under heavy pressure. In some cases, their relatives still living in Iran are harassed or threatened. Nor does Iran shy away from more extreme measures; the family members of activists abroad are sometimes sentenced to long prison terms.”³¹

Amnesty International (AI)’s 2021 report mentioned that “[d]issidents and journalists based abroad faced intensified threats, and their families in Iran were interrogated and/or arbitrarily detained in reprisal for their work”.³² Subsequent AI reports covering the years 2022 and 2023 did not specifically address the topic of how the Iranian authorities treat Iran-based family members of Iranians residing abroad.³³

In a February 2023 interview with the Canadian Research Directorate, a retired professor who has published books and articles on the leftist movement in Iran, diaspora, religious fundamentalism, secularism and multiculturalism, stated that Iranian authorities “want to put pressure” on the families of those abroad “who are doing things they disagree with”.³⁴

Furthermore, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)’s July 2023 *Country Information Report on Iran* and the United States Department of State (USDOS)’s annual human rights report on 2023 both state that officials sometimes harassed or arrested family members of human rights activists. Neither report clarifies whether the human rights activists whose family members are targeted reside in Iran or abroad.³⁵ Similarly, without specifying whether referring to political opponents inside Iran or those abroad, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, citing confidential sources and news articles, reports:

“According to several sources, the authorities regularly put pressure on the family members of political opponents because of their family relationship. There have been several reports of the authorities calling in family members of political activists for questioning and subjecting them to intimidating interrogations. During these interrogations, the authorities asked them to put pressure on their family members to stop their activities. In addition to intimidation, the family members of activists have also been mistreated by the authorities, arrested and/or sentenced to prison terms.

²⁹ Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024

³⁰ Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024

³¹ The Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 09/2023, pp. 58-59, [url](#); IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#)

³² AI, 29/03/2022, [url](#)

³³ AI, 28/03/2023, [url](#)

³⁴ IRB, 02/03/2023, [url](#)

³⁵ DFAT, 24/07/2023, p. 27, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

Family members of political opponents experienced telephone threats or were intimidated by intelligence or security service personnel who came to their home. In some cases, family members lost their job or were made to abandon their studies. Sometimes they were given a travel ban or had their passport application refused.”³⁶

3. Scale

Cedoca found little information on the number of dissident diaspora members who are targeted by the Iranian authorities through their family members. The consulted sources either do not provide any information on the number of people affected³⁷ or use vague wording. For example, the September 2023 *General Country of Origin Information Report on Iran* by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates “in some cases” relatives of journalists, opposition media and critical voices operating from abroad are harassed or threatened, adding that they are “sometimes” sentenced to long prison terms (see [2. Proxy punishment](#)).³⁸ Similarly, the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) writes in a report on Iranian Kurds in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) that Iranian Kurdish journalists working for media in the KRI “occasionally” receive threats involving their family members in Iran (see [4.2 Activists](#)).³⁹ One exception is a Reporters Without borders (RSF) report according to which around 60% of the dozens of exiled Iranian journalists living in the UK said their families in Iran had experienced threats or harassment linked to their work (see [4.1. Journalists](#)).⁴⁰

Cedoca asked Dr Maghzi to what extent the Iranian authorities target family members of dissidents residing abroad. In an e-mail on 10 September 2024, she replied:

“The exact scale of this targeting is difficult to determine, as many dissidents abroad choose not to publicize the harassment against their families, fearing it may escalate the situation. However, numerous reports indicate that the Iranian government frequently employs these tactics, mostly through phone calls or summoning family members to security offices. As a lawyer, I often advise families not to answer these calls or visit security offices. Instead, they should ask if there are any formal charges and request official summonses to court. Experience shows that in many cases, security forces prefer not to make their actions explicit and keep the pressure subtle. Unfortunately, not all families are politically active or aware of their rights, so many feel intimidated and end up responding to these calls or attending the offices.”⁴¹

In a phone call on 23 September 2024 Cedoca asked the same question to the researcher on transnational repression, who replied:

“Proxy punishment is one of the most widespread methods to repress dissidents abroad. It is widely used because it’s one of the easiest ways to target someone and it’s very efficient also, because it puts people in a dilemma over whether to continue their activism or not. And the Iranian regime uses this method substantially against everyone who has a public profile. [...] It is so easy and the Iranian security intelligence agencies have a lot of resources, also human resources, it doesn’t cost

³⁶ The Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 09/2023, p. 40, [url](#)

³⁷ FH, 24/02/2022, [url](#); FH, 13/03/2023, [url](#); FH, 29/02/2024, [url](#); AI, 29/03/2022, [url](#)

³⁸ The Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 09/2023, pp. 58-59, [url](#); IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#)

³⁹ DIS, 06/2024, p. 29, [url](#)

⁴⁰ RSF, 04/2024, p. 18, [url](#)

⁴¹ Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024

them a lot to find out who the parents are, who the brother or sister is, and to pay them a visit. A simple visit will already send a very strong signal to someone.”⁴²

The researcher further remarked:

“Transnational repression intensifies whenever there’s political conflict or tension inside the country [...]. So you will see this coming in waves, whenever the regime feels a challenge or feels threatened they will intensify this repression across borders.”⁴³

4. Groups targeted by proxy punishment

Cedoca found several cases of Iranian diaspora members being targeted through proxy punishment in the consulted sources. The following overview does not pretend to be exhaustive and focuses on the period 2021-2024. Where possible, Cedoca describes the diaspora member’s profile and activities. It should be noted that instances of threats against relatives of diaspora members are underreported⁴⁴ as many choose to remain quiet about the harassment of their families in order to avoid escalating the situation.⁴⁵

4.1. Journalists

Several human rights organisations and (inter)governmental bodies report that the Iranian regime targets exiled journalists’ families in Iran.

In its annual reports covering 2021, 2022 and 2023 Freedom House (FH) stated that Iranian authorities summon and threaten family members in Iran of journalists working for Persian-language media outside the country in order to pressure and intimidate them.⁴⁶ Similarly, AI’s report on 2021 mentioned that family members in Iran of journalists based abroad were interrogated or arbitrarily detained.⁴⁷ In September 2023 the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote that in some cases, relatives in Iran of journalists and opposition media operating from abroad are harassed or threatened.⁴⁸

In April 2024, RSF published a report titled *Transnational Repression of Iranian Journalists in the UK*, based on testimony gathered in 2023 from dozens of exiled Iranian journalists living in the United Kingdom (UK).⁴⁹ The report reveals that besides directly targeting journalists based abroad, “the regime in Tehran routinely targets their families back in Iran”, with [a]round 60% of respondents [saying] their families had experienced threats or harassment linked to their work, [...]” including being “called in for questioning multiple times, [...]”. Some of the interrogations were described as aggressive and frightening. For example, one relative was blindfolded while another one was interrogated by three masked men. The report further mentions that:

“During interrogations, family members have been threatened with economic sanctions, or never seeing their journalist relatives again. Sometimes, interrogators have attempted to coerce the family member to convince their relative to stop being a journalist, to arrange to meet their relative

⁴² Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

⁴³ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

⁴⁴ Moss D. M., Michaelsen M., Kennedy G., 10/05/2022, p. 738, [url](#)

⁴⁵ Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024; Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

⁴⁶ FH, 24/02/2022, [url](#); FH, 13/03/2023, [url](#); FH, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁷ AI, 29/03/2022, [url](#)

⁴⁸ The Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 09/2023, pp. 58-59, [url](#); IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#)

⁴⁹ RSF, 04/2024, pp. 3, 6, [url](#)

in a neighbouring country such as Iraq or Turkey, or to put officials directly in touch with their relative abroad.”⁵⁰

Besides interrogations, other tactics used by the regime to harass journalists’ family members included applying economic penalties such as asset freezes or job or pension loss, the confiscation of passports, travel bans, surveillance, tapping phone calls, the spread of defamatory stories, and detentions.⁵¹

The RSF report points out that “[a]s with other forms of repression, the harassment of family members tends to escalate at times of upheaval and increased visibility for Iran on the global stage. Journalists said it had become worse in 2017, and then much worse again when they began covering the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022”.⁵² Similarly, albeit referring to the direct repression of activists in Iran rather than proxy punishment, FH reports:

“Ahead of the one-year anniversary of the protests in September 2023, authorities increased pressure on dissidents, activists, and the family members of those killed in an attempt to prevent additional protests.”⁵³

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) established the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, to investigate alleged human rights violations related to the protests that began on 16 September 2022.⁵⁴ The mission found that:

“Journalists, including from BBC Persian, Iran Wire and Voice of America, who have reported on the death in custody of Jina Mahsa Amini and on the protests that began on 16 September 2022, faced harassment as their family members being contacted and threatened by security forces, arrested and charged, in an apparent attempt to exert pressure on them and prevent them from further reporting. A journalist, who lives outside Iran and formerly worked for an international media corporation, described the harassment of her family, including them receiving several summons, being interviewed by members of the Ministry of Intelligence and [the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)], her parents’ house being raided, and the confiscation of her family members’ passports.

[...] Likewise, a journalist based outside Iran and working for an international media organization described how pressure was put on the extended family in Iran as a result of reporting inside and outside Iran on the protests. Family members were subject to surveillance, including possible mobile device monitoring, had their passports taken, and bank accounts frozen. In the course of interrogations before the Ministry of Intelligence and IRGC, threats were made against children of the family, including alluding to sexual violence against a girl. A journalist reporting on Iran outside of the country was warned not to travel to countries near Iran to visit family members after being warned of possible abduction from there to Iran.”⁵⁵

Regarding journalists, the researcher on transnational repression mentions:

“Journalists and external media stations report that they receive these threats a lot, all these Iranian media stations abroad, no matter if they are known in Europe, influential stations like BBC Persian or Iran International, but also smaller exile media, online media with a certain visibility inside Iran. So what counts is the visibility inside Iran. And in the case of journalists, they do not only target the journalists who are on TV or who write articles but also they find out about the staff that works in these organisations so you don’t need to have your name out. What matters is that

⁵⁰ RSF, 04/2024, p. 18, [url](#)

⁵¹ RSF, 04/2024, p. 3, 19, [url](#)

⁵² RSF, 04/2024, p. 18, [url](#)

⁵³ FH, 29/02/2024, [url](#)

⁵⁴ UNHRC, 19/03/2024, p. 1, [url](#)

⁵⁵ UNHRC, 19/03/2024, pp. 389-390, [url](#)

you are somehow affiliated with this organization. So that's for journalists because the regime feels threatened by these external media stations."⁵⁶

Several news outlets similarly reported targeting of family members of Iranian diaspora journalists.

The father of dissident Iranian journalist Mohammad Bagher Moradi was questioned by the IRGC about his son's activities in Turkey, according to sources quoted by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). The journalist had fled to Turkey in 2014 after he was sentenced to five years in prison for collusion against the state. He went missing in Turkey in May 2022 and resurfaced in custody in Tehran in November 2022. During interrogation, the IRGC reportedly told the father to advise his son to make a live television confession.⁵⁷

In November 2022, Deutsche Welle reported that the Iranian regime had been threatening its employees and their families on a massive scale for years. The broadcaster reported that employees and relatives had been interrogated during family visits in Iran. After the 2022 protests began in Iran, threats against members of the Farsi editorial team intensified.⁵⁸

In early 2023, BBC Persian Service journalists' family members in Iran reported increased and severe harassment, including being summoned for interrogations and being threatened because their relatives worked for the BBC. For example, reporter Parham Ghobadi's brother was forced out of his job at Iran's oil ministry.⁵⁹

In May 2023, Sajjad Shahrabi, the brother of Shima Shahrabi, editor-in-chief of IranWire's Persian-language website, was arrested⁶⁰ and detained for more than three weeks. Shima Shahrabi's father and other relatives in Iran were summoned by the Intelligence Ministry and questioned about her activities, her relationship with her brother and the activities of IranWire.⁶¹ Intelligence officers confiscated some of her father's belongings.⁶² The journalist attributes her brother's arrest to her journalism and human rights activities.⁶³ A fellow journalist at IranWire describes Sajjad Shahrabi's arrest as an attempt to silence an independent media outlet that covers events in Iran.⁶⁴ RSF calls Shahrabi's arrest "yet another example of the intimidation and pressure tactics employed by the Islamic republic against Iranian journalists and media in exile".⁶⁵ According to USDOS, "Sajjad Shahrabi was later convicted of collusion to commit a crime against internal and external security and propaganda against the regime, for which he received a 10-month prison sentence, a two-year travel ban, and a two-year ban from using social media".⁶⁶

Finally, documents allegedly from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, leaked by a hacktivist group that claims to have breached the Iranian judiciary's servers, reveal that the Iranian intelligence ministry targeted Iran International journalists working in London by summoning fifteen of their relatives to meetings where they were warned that they faced legal consequences. According to the

⁵⁶ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

⁵⁷ RFE/RL, 29/11/2022, [url](#); Al-Monitor (Hurtas S.), 09/12/2022, [url](#)

⁵⁸ FAZ (Hanfeld M.), 28/11/2022, [url](#)

⁵⁹ BBC (Ghobadi P.), 12/01/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁰ IranWire (Shams O.), 04/07/2023, [url](#); VOA, 07/06/2023, [url](#); IranWire (Shahrabi S.), 24/05/2023, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

⁶¹ IranWire (Shahrabi S.), 24/05/2023, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

⁶² The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

⁶³ IranWire (Shahrabi S.), 24/05/2023, [url](#); USDOS, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

⁶⁴ IranWire (Shams O.), 04/07/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁵ VOA, 07/06/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁶ USDOS, 23/04/2024, [url](#)

leaked documents, the regime also blocked more than 70 of the channel's support staff from carrying out financial transactions in Iran.⁶⁷

4.2. Activists

In May 2021, the Iranian authorities arrested Ahwazi Arab Falah Heidari, brother of Abdorrahman Heidari, the spokesperson for the political group Patriotic Arab Democratic Movement in Ahwaz, who was based abroad. Falah Heidari and his son, Safa Heidari, were interrogated about the political activities of Abdorrahman Heidari. Falah Heidari was also questioned about the religious beliefs and practices of his other son, Alaa Heidari, who had left Iran several years earlier, sought asylum abroad after converting from Shia to Sunni Islam and had since engaged in online proselytizing activities. Authorities tried to coerce Falah Heidari into pressuring his brother and son to stop their activities or to relay the authorities' threats to kill or abduct and forcibly return them to the country. Also in May 2021 an IRGC officer interrogated Falah Heidari's 15-year-old daughter about her family's contact with her paternal uncle and brother abroad.⁶⁸ More than a month after his arrest, Falah Heidari remained detained in an unidentified location.⁶⁹

According to AI, "[i]n August [2021], intelligence officials interrogated the relatives of exiled Kurdish human rights defender Arsalan Yarahmadi and threatened him with death."⁷⁰ Yarahmadi and his wife Zhila Mostajer are board members of the Erbil-based human rights organisation Hengaw. Since the foundation of Hengaw in 2017, intelligence officials have repeatedly summoned and threatened members of the pair's families in Iran in an attempt to dissuade them from their media activism and to force the relatives to convince the activists to return to Iran.⁷¹

In April 2022 AI reported that the Iranian authorities harassed the Iran-based relatives of at least five witnesses who, after having fled Iran, testified from abroad in November 2021 and February 2022 at the International People's Tribunal on Iran's Atrocities, a non-judicial tribunal established in London by civil society organizations and international legal experts to investigate the authorities' deadly crackdown on the November 2019 nationwide protests. The harassment the relatives were subjected to included:

"[...] arbitrary arrest and detention, prosecution on vaguely worded national security-related charges, threatening telephone calls, summoning for coercive interrogations, and raids on their homes and places of work".⁷²

The report further states:

"The authorities have ordered relatives in Iran to cut ties with Tribunal witnesses based abroad and publicly denounce their testimonies or 'face consequences' including detention and other harm to them and their family members, including children. They have also warned relatives in Iran that their loved ones are not safe from Iranian security forces even when they are abroad, and pressured families to reveal their locations."⁷³

According to an August 2022 AI report, "[t]he Iranian authorities have a history of targeting family members of those who have real or perceived ties with the [People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran

⁶⁷ The Times (Hamilton F.), 21/02/2024, [url](#)

⁶⁸ AI, 24/06/2021, [url](#); USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 02/06/2022, [url](#)

⁶⁹ AI, 24/06/2021, [url](#)

⁷⁰ AI, 29/03/2022, [url](#)

⁷¹ IranWire (Yousefi H.), 19/07/2021, [url](#)

⁷² AI, 07/04/2022, [url](#)

⁷³ AI, 07/04/2022, [url](#)

(PMOI)]⁷⁴." In April 2022, a Revolutionary Court sentenced Ali Younesi and Amirhossein Moradi to 16 years in prison on national security charges after a "grossly unfair trial". According to the human rights organization, "[t]hey are prisoners of conscience targeted for exercising their right to peaceful assembly and their families' real or perceived links to opposition groups. [...] The authorities violated their right to be presumed innocent by publicly accusing them of ties to 'counterrevolutionary' groups apparently based on their families' real or perceived association with the PMOI."⁷⁵ During a public interrogation in July 2020 Younesi reportedly said "Iran's security apparatus was exerting pressure on his brother and sister living abroad". A student activist who knows the two students and is familiar with the case told IranWire that "[i]t seems that cases like Ali Younesi, some of whose family members used to belong to the [Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO)], are 'ideal candidates' for the Ministry of Intelligence, who force them to confess to being connected to this organization."⁷⁶

In October 2022, Sasan Amjadi, an Iranian Kurdish⁷⁷ activist and political analyst residing in Switzerland⁷⁸ who closely follows the situation in the Kurdish regions of Iran through his many contacts there⁷⁹ and who has more than 27.000 followers on X,⁸⁰ told a Swiss broadcaster that when he posts a tweet critical of the government, people close to the government and trolls on social media discredit the content and government officials threaten family members in Iran in order to try to silence him.⁸¹

Maryam Banihashemi, an Iranian woman who had been organizing and participating in anti-regime rallies in various Swiss cities, told the same broadcaster that she had repeatedly received hate messages. Some of those messages threatened her father, who lives in Iran.⁸² She is active on Instagram, where she has 24.000 followers⁸³ and regularly gives media interviews.⁸⁴

According the researcher on transnational repression, family members of the organisers of the 22 October 2022 rally in Berlin in support of the protest movement in Iran, that drew 80.000 participants,⁸⁵ received threats.⁸⁶

A "cybersecurity analyst at a US-based human rights organization [...] who [...] was imprisoned in Iran for protesting the mandatory hijab, before fleeing to Canada" told the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) her brother was arrested and interrogated by the Iranian authorities for 10 hours in 2022 about how she had fled Iran and where she was employed abroad. Her brother lost his employment at that time. In late 2022 her brother was again arrested in Iran, and her family was forced to block her on all social media networks in order to secure the brother's release.⁸⁷

A November 2022 American Broadcasting Company (ABC) News report detailed the case of Sahar Gholizadeh, an Australian-Iranian nurse who during the Mahsa Amini protests, began reaching out to demonstrators in Iran and reposting their messages and videos as a means of subverting government censorship. As dissidents in Iran alerted her to allegations of police brutality, she began publishing the

⁷⁴ The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) is also known as Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) or Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO).

⁷⁵ AI, 04/08/2022, [url](#)

⁷⁶ IranWire (Pourisa M.), 07/09/2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷ SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#)

⁷⁸ Change.org (Fotoohi A.), 17/10/2022, [url](#)

⁷⁹ Le Monde (Golshiri G.), 11/10/2022, [url](#)

⁸⁰ Sasan Amjadi [X], s.d., [url](#)

⁸¹ SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#)

⁸² SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#)

⁸³ SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#); Marybanihashemi [Instagram profile], s.d., [url](#)

⁸⁴ Maryam Banihashemi [Linktree], s.d., [url](#); SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#)

⁸⁵ DW, 22/10/2022, [url](#)

⁸⁶ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

⁸⁷ IRB, 02/03/2023, [url](#)

names of officials involved, and outing them on her social media accounts.⁸⁸ She said regime officials regularly questioned her sister at her workplace⁸⁹ and warned her she could be taken into custody as a result of Sahar's actions. Her brother-in-law was threatened with losing his job if she kept posting. Regime officials visited Sahar's father and said they would burn his properties down if she didn't stop.⁹⁰ During nine years up until a few weeks before Mahsa Amini's death, Sahar Gholizadeh was president of the Australian Iranian Society of Victoria.⁹¹ She also appeared in a 29 September 2022 Iran International report as one of the organisers of a Melbourne protest gathering in support of the nationwide protests in Iran.⁹²

A February 2023 report by ABC News mentions the mother of a man attending anti-government protests in Australia being arrested and detained in Iran for almost a month before being released on bail. At the time of writing the mother had an upcoming court hearing for "acting against internal and foreign security". Her son had already been on the radar of the Iranian regime: before he moved to Australia in 2014, he had been detained in Evin prison due to his student activism.⁹³

Also in February 2023, The Independent reported that Medis, who does not want her last name to be published due to security concerns and is described as an outspoken activist and doctor living in a European capital, received dozens of emails a day, threatening her with murder and rape. Regime enforcers made threatening phone calls to her elderly parents in Iran, urging them to "shut their daughter up". She recounted that her mother was told "We're going to do something to your daughter so brutal that you won't even recognise her corpse."⁹⁴

In a February 2023 interview with the IRB, a lawyer and human rights activist, with expertise in Canada-Iran relations, stated that "[s]ome individuals in Canada have had their family in Iran visited by authorities after they had participated in televised or online interviews". The IRB added that "the lawyer reported having experienced this first-hand".⁹⁵

In its report titled *Iranian Kurds in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq* the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) writes:

"However, not just members of Iranian Kurdish parties are targeted by Iran, as Iranian Kurds who are politically active in the media or comment on politics in Iran, can be targeted by Iranian pressure too. Especially vulnerable are those individuals who have families in Iran. Occasionally, Iranian Kurdish journalists, working for media in KRI, receive threats involving their family members in Iran."⁹⁶

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran established by the UNHRC found that family members of Iranian women human rights defenders based outside the country have been arrested with the aim to silence them:

"The relatives of a woman human rights defender who had been outspoken in the media and participated in public events denouncing human rights violations, including at the European Parliament, were arrested and held for several weeks in order to force her to abandon her activism.

⁸⁸ ABC News (Fazal M.), 04/11/2022, [url](#)

⁸⁹ ABC News (Brown R., Fazal M.), 03/02/2023, [url](#)

⁹⁰ ABC News (Fazal M.), 04/11/2022, [url](#)

⁹¹ Sahar Gholizadeh [LinkedIn profile], s.d., [url](#)

⁹² اینترنشنال ایران [Iran International] (@IranIntl), 29/11/2022, [url](#)

⁹³ ABC News (Brown R., Fazal M.), 03/02/2023, [url](#)

⁹⁴ The Independent (Daraghi B.), 13/02/2023, [url](#)

⁹⁵ IRB, 02/03/2023, [url](#)

⁹⁶ DIS, 06/2024, p. 29, [url](#)

A family member of a woman human rights defender reportedly lost their job in Iran because of her activism and her other relatives ended their contact with her for fear of reprisals.”⁹⁷

An April 2023 CNN report quoted several exiled Iranian activists who allege the Islamic Republic uses their families in Iran in order to silence them. Nazila Golestan, an activist of three decades and co-founder of the opposition organization HamAva,⁹⁸ says Tehran targets the diaspora because of their “organizing power and political sway”. Sahar Nasser, described as an outspoken critic of the Islamic Republic living in Sweden, says her family is constantly harassed by Iran’s intelligence service:

“‘They (the intelligence service) have created this distance between me and my family, which is mental torture,’ she said through tears. ‘For every single thing I do, every time I appear on TV, every political act that me and my friends take, every time we speak with a government or a political representative, they call my parents.’”⁹⁹

Massi Kamari, a Paris-based Iranian activist and member of HamAva who participates in frequent protests, says Iranian intelligence threatened to send her family to Tehran’s Evin prison if she continued her activism against the regime abroad. She fled Iran fearing for her life due to her activism and received refugee status in 2018. According to Kamari, her parents in Iran received repeated calls from the intelligence service for a summoning to their local headquarters. On December 31 2023, Kamari said she received a call from a man she believed to be a member of Iran’s intelligence service, who used her mother’s confiscated phone to reach her while her parents were inside the offices of Iran’s intelligence service in Tehran. The man accused her of committing crimes against the security of the Islamic Republic saying the articles she publishes on her Instagram page aim to overthrow the Islamic Republic and incite the Iranian people to commit acts against national security. Kamari recorded the phone call, fragments of which were published by several news media.¹⁰⁰

In June 2023 Iranian security forces arrested the son and brother of Fariba Borhanzahi Baluch, a renowned Baluch human rights activist who resides in London.¹⁰¹ Since the beginning of the 2022 anti-establishment movement, Baluch has been one of the leading activists in exile, organising demonstrations and events in European countries in relation to the situation in Iran. She has also been one of the primary sources of growing awareness of the systemic discrimination against the Baluch minority people and the living conditions in the impoverished Sistan and Baluchistan province.¹⁰² Her son and brother were kept in custody without charges for at least two weeks.¹⁰³ Her 18-year-old son had travelled to England to visit his mother and was arrested along with his uncle and seven other relatives and friends while travelling from Tehran to Iranshahr. Baluch’s relatives are not involved in her human rights activities¹⁰⁴ and their arrest is described as an effort by the authorities to pressure the activist into stopping her activism.¹⁰⁵ Apart from Baluch’s brother and son, all detainees were released on the same night. Security agents reportedly said that they would release the two when Baluch stops her activities.¹⁰⁶ Baluch’s parents were also summoned.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁷ UNHRC, 19/03/2024, pp. 383, [url](#)

⁹⁸ opposition organization advocating for a secular and democratic Iran, Iran HamAva, s.d., [url](#)

⁹⁹ CNN (Abdelaziz S.), 21/04/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰ CNN (Abdelaziz S.), 21/04/2023, [url](#); Le Point (Arefi A.), 10/01/2023, [url](#); Iran International Newsroom, 07/01/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰¹ IranWire (Shams O.), 04/07/2023, [url](#); IranWire, 21/06/2023, [url](#); The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#); Hengaw, 21/06/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰² The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰³ The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴ IranWire, 21/06/2023, [url](#); The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#); Hengaw, 21/06/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ Hengaw, 21/06/2023, [url](#); The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶ The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#); IranWire (Shams O.), 04/07/2023, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷ The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

In March 2024, IranWire published a report in which five exiled Arab political activists testify about the systematic targeting of their families in Iran in an attempt to undermine their activities. Their family members are repeatedly summoned and interrogated about the activists' activities and contacts abroad, and are coerced into giving the activists' contact details, messaging them and attempting to lure them to neighbouring countries for abduction and repatriation to Iran. The relatives are threatened with arrest if they do not comply. Several of the activists testify that besides their immediate family members, such as parents, spouses, and children, extended family members, such as uncles and cousins, are also targeted. One activist, who wished to remain anonymous, was incarcerated for several months in Iran and released on bail before fleeing the country. Two others, Haifa Asadi and Mehdi Hashemi, are described as an Arab political couple who sought refuge in Europe due to escalating government threats.¹⁰⁸ Haifa Asadi contributed to a 2013 Justice for Iran report on the struggle of Ahwazi Arab activists,¹⁰⁹ participated in academic panels on women's and ethnic minority rights,¹¹⁰ and currently has 18.000 followers on Instagram.¹¹¹ Mehdi Hashemi also appears in other IranWire reports on Arab issues.¹¹² The fourth Arab activist, Karim Barvayeh, had been sentenced to a prison sentence and internal exile in Iran.¹¹³ The report does not contain any details on the fifth activist's profile.¹¹⁴

4.3. Protesters

In this section, Cedoca included cases of protesters – who are not described as activists –targeted with proxy punishment.

In a submission to a Senate inquiry, the Australian Department of Home Affairs said it was “aware of reports that pro-Iranian government informants are surveilling former Iranian residents protesting against the regime in Australia and threatening their relatives in Iran as a result”, the Guardian reported in February 2023.¹¹⁵ The report does not contain further information on the mentioned protesters' profiles. Cedoca was not able to find the submission within the time constraints of this research.

IranWire reports that relatives of two men who were filmed by a Tehran municipality official during a protest in Brussels in June 2023 against Tehran's mayor Alireza Zakani's visit to the city were interrogated and harassed by security agents in Iran.¹¹⁶

According to Dr Maghzi, the timing of protests impacts the regime's pressure on protest organisers and protesters:

“[T]here's often an increase in pressure around significant protest anniversaries, such as the Mahsa (Jina) Amini protests in September. Families of those organizing protests or attending demonstrations outside Iranian embassies are targeted both before and after these events.”¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ Justice for Iran, 21/02/2013, p. 6, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ UCLA, 21/05/2023, [url](#)

¹¹¹ Haifaasadi [Instagram profile], s.d., [url](#)

¹¹² IranWire, 25/05/2023, [url](#); IranWire, 20/08/2019, [url](#)

¹¹³ IranWire (Yari P.), 10/05/2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁵ The Guardian (Hurst D.), 14/02/2023, [url](#)

¹¹⁶ IranWire (Shams O.), 04/07/2023, [url](#)

¹¹⁷ Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024

Asked how likely it is that the Iranian authorities would target family members of low level political activists such as the participants in demonstrations in Europe and people who are critical of the regime on social media, the researcher on transnational repression replied:

"These demonstrations are definitely monitored, also by people who might in one way or another be affiliated to the embassy or by regime informants, and sometimes these people film, and I am not sure if this is a rumour or not, that the regime also uses facial recognition technology to identify participants, what I can imagine is that they would also use this tactic against ordinary Iranians because they want to recruit them as spies, to put them under pressure, by threatening their families or harassing their families, to recruit them as spies, informants in the diaspora, so that they increase their network of informants, it is not unlikely to use this also against ordinary participants."¹¹⁸

4.4. Christians

According to the 2022 joint annual report *Rights Violations against Christians in Iran* by Article 18, Middle East Concern (MEC), Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Open Doors International, family members of some Iranian Christians active outside Iran are harassed:

"Six expatriate Iranian Christians reported in 2022 that multiple family members in Iran had been summoned for questioning and harassed regarding their relative's activities abroad. In one case, this included the 95-year-old father of the individual under investigation. The family members were typically told that if they persuaded their relatives to return to Iran, the potential judicial sentences they faced for their Christian activities would be reduced."¹¹⁹

The report does not contain further details on the profiles or activities of the abovementioned expatriate Christians.¹²⁰

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)'s report *Religious Freedom in Iran in 2022* pointed out that "the IRGC continues to target high-profile members of the Gonabadi Sufi community abroad, threatening over social media channels to harm or kill them" and added that "Christians, Gonabadi Sufis, and members of spiritualist movements who flee Iran for European countries have received threatening messages from social media accounts linked to Iran's government." However, no mention was made of their relatives in Iran being targeted.¹²¹

,USDOS indicated in its 2023 freedom of religion report that church leaders of the evangelical Iranian community in Armenia alleged they were persistently harassed and received threats to themselves and family members via telephone calls and texts, as well as sporadic threats made in person. They believed the harassment and threats were orchestrated by Iran's state security services.¹²² More generally, the report states that "Iranian nationals from religious minority groups [...] reported they sometimes received threats from apparent Iranian regime officials while abroad – either to themselves or to their family members."¹²³ The report does not clarify whether the aforementioned threatened family members reside in Iran or abroad and whether they are also directly targeted.¹²⁴

Cedoca did not find any mention of Iran-based relatives of Christian Iranian expatriates being targeted by the Iranian authorities in USCIRF's annual reports covering 2021, 2022 and 2023 or its September

¹¹⁸ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

¹¹⁹ Article 18 et al., 19/02/2023, p. 10, [url](#)

¹²⁰ Article 18 et al., 19/02/2023, [url](#)

¹²¹ USCIRF (Weiner S.), 07/2022, [url](#)

¹²² USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 26/06/2024, [url](#)

¹²³ USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 26/06/2024, [url](#)

¹²⁴ USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 26/06/2024, [url](#)

2023 country update on Iran, nor in the 2020, 2021 and 2023 annual reports on rights violations against Christians in Iran by Article 18, MEC, CSW and Open Doors International, nor in USDOS' 2021 and 2022 freedom of religion reports.¹²⁵

Asked about the likelihood of Iranian authorities targeting Iran-based relatives of expatriate Christian converts proclaiming their faith on social media, the researcher on transnational repression replied that he had not come across such cases, adding that his research focuses more on activists. In light of the ongoing monitoring, he believes it is not unlikely that Iranians openly proclaiming and discussing their conversion will face retaliation.¹²⁶

5. Patterns

According to the researcher on transnational repression:

"Every Iranian dissident or activist who goes somewhere with a public statement is at risk of that her or his family members are being threatened, so what counts is that you somehow give a public statement or make your opposition, your criticism public, also on social media. They are very sensitive to that."¹²⁷

Asked whether there are patterns to be discerned in the authorities' targeting of family members of dissidents residing abroad, the researcher on transnational repression replied:

"It is very difficult to discern patterns because it is so widespread and not everybody talks about it, is ready to talk about these threats. So one pattern is that whenever you raise your profile or you speak out in public or you have a certain public profile –either with regard to audiences inside Iran, so these external media stations or on social media that target people inside Iran, or activists who speak to international human rights organisations or foreign policymakers about human rights violations inside Iran. This is one criterion that definitely risks triggering these threats but other patterns are really difficult to discern. Regarding the profile of the activists, it goes from journalists, all kinds of human rights advocates, even ordinary Iranians who speak out on social media risk that their parents or families are being targeted. It is difficult to discern other patterns."¹²⁸

Asked whether there is a minimal level of visibility needed to attract the Iranian authorities' interest in ordinary Iranians who speak out on social media, the researcher on transnational repression replied:

"That is also very difficult to say because you would need to know more about the work of the intelligence agencies, which is by nature secretive. But we also know that ordinary Iranians who still travel back and forth, whenever they go for a visit to Iran, that sometimes some of these travellers are interrogated at the airport and they are shown social media posts critical of the regime that they have made. So there seems to be a very extensive monitoring of social media ongoing and authorities seem to keep track of a wide range of critical posts and even from ordinary

¹²⁵ USCIRF, 25/04/2022, pp. 22-23, [url](#); USCIRF, 01/05/2023, pp. 26-27, [url](#); USCIRF, 05/2024, pp. 32-33, [url](#); USCIRF (Weiner S.), 09/2023, [url](#); Article 18 et al., 02/2021, [url](#); Article 18 et al., 01/2022, [url](#); Article 18 et al., 01/2024, [url](#); USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 02/06/2022, [url](#); USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 15/05/2023, [url](#)

¹²⁶ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

¹²⁷ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

¹²⁸ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

people because they think they can use it against them at some point. It seems to be quite extensive, this monitoring.”¹²⁹

Cedoca also asked the researcher on transnational repression whether there is a minimal threshold of visibility that triggers the targeting of activists’ family members in Iran, to which he replied:

“By nature these regimes are arbitrary and there are no criteria. For activists it is also difficult to estimate, if I go to two demonstrations or participate in two interviews then I can still stay under the radar and I can do it and if I do three interviews I will trigger their interest. By nature, this repression is arbitrary and aims to create uncertainty. When they target one person they want to instil fear in a larger community so it’s not only directed against this one person, but other people too should think that the same might happen to them too. So there’s no benchmark or threshold and it works like this, that everybody can become a victim of this method. And as I said, it’s really not complicated for the authorities to find out who the family members are and whenever they come across something and they want to either punish somebody for going public or they want to put them under pressure to do something for the authorities, to use whatever they have found against them and then harass their family members.”¹³⁰

Cedoca also asked Dr Maghzi if there are discernible patterns in the authorities’ targeting of family members of dissidents residing abroad, to which she replied:

“Yes, there are some patterns in the way the Iranian regime targets dissidents abroad. The regime often focuses on dissidents who have organizational ties with political groups, especially those that Iran claims have military branches, such as the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), Kurdish political parties like Komala and [Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK)], or Balochi groups like Jaish al-Adl. While many of these groups have declared that their military goals are dismantled, the Iranian government continues to target their members and families under this pretext.

High-profile political and human rights activists are another frequent target. Journalists, particularly those working for influential outlets like BBC Persian, Voice of America (VOA), and Iran International, are also singled out. Additionally, social media influencers with large followings who are critical of the regime face similar pressures.

Timing is also important—there’s often an increase in pressure around significant protest anniversaries, such as the Mahsa (Jina) Amini protests in September. Families of those organizing protests or attending demonstrations outside Iranian embassies are targeted both before and after these events. Dissidents who have fled Iran and now live in neighboring countries like Iraq and Turkey are also under significant pressure from the Iranian authorities.”¹³¹

Cedoca asked Dr Maghzi if she was aware of cases of family members of dissidents residing abroad being targeted in the period 2022 until the time of writing and to describe the dissidents’ profiles. Referring to the targeting of the relatives of Arab activists, Fariba Baluch, BBC Persian and Iran International journalists and –before 2022– of activist Masih Alinejad and Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, she replied:

“In the above-mentioned reports, we see a clear pattern of targeting the families of outspoken Baloch activists (from ethnic minorities), Arab activists (another ethnic minority group), journalists, and influential political and human rights activists. These individuals are specifically targeted due to their visibility and activism against the Iranian regime.

¹²⁹ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

¹³⁰ Researcher on transnational repression, phone call, 23/09/2024

¹³¹ Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024

There are numerous other cases involving individuals affiliated with political parties, but many of these have not been officially reported in the media. For these activists, such harassment and pressure on their families are almost seen as an extension of their political activism, making it a regular but less-publicized form of intimidation.¹³²

The majority of the cases of proxy punishment Cedoca found in the consulted sources fit the categories put forward by Dr Maghzi: dissidents who have organizational ties with political groups, high-profile or influential political and human rights activists and regime-critical social media influencers with large followings. Several cases fit the category of dissidents who have organizational ties with political groups, such as the member of an opposition organization in France who had engaged in activism in Iran and who participates in many protests,¹³³ Kurdish political party members in Iraq,¹³⁴ and the case where a relative in Iran was targeted because of two diaspora members' real or perceived ties with the PMOI.¹³⁵ Several other cases found by Cedoca fit the category of high-profile or influential political and human rights activists: two of the targeted diaspora members work for a human rights organization,¹³⁶ one is a human rights lawyer and academic,¹³⁷ one co-founded an opposition organisation and has been an activist for three decades,¹³⁸ several have high-profile functions in ethnic minority rights organisations such as spokesperson¹³⁹ or board member,¹⁴⁰ one is described as a leading ethnic minority rights activist and primary source on human rights violations,¹⁴¹ several are involved in organising protests,¹⁴² several others participate in public events denouncing Iranian human rights violations or engage with host country politicians,¹⁴³ and one was a local community leader¹⁴⁴ involved in outing officials involved in human rights violations.¹⁴⁵ Cedoca also found several cases of proxy punishment targeting regime-critical social media influencers with large followings¹⁴⁶ or diaspora members who are outspoken in the media.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, Cedoca remarks that among the cases of diaspora members targeted with proxy punishment, there are several individuals who had previously been imprisoned¹⁴⁸ or otherwise pressured by the authorities in Iran due to their activism.¹⁴⁹

¹³² Maghzi A., lawyer and human rights researcher affiliated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, e-mail, 10/09/2024

¹³³ CNN (Abdelaziz S.), 21/04/2023, [url](#); Le Point (Arefi A.), 10/01/2023, [url](#); Iran International Newsroom, 07/01/2023, [url](#)

¹³⁴ DIS, 06/2024, p. 29, [url](#)

¹³⁵ AI, 04/08/2022, [url](#); IranWire (Pourisa M.), 07/09/2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶ IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#); Justice for Iran, 21/02/2013, p. 6, [url](#); IRB, 02/03/2023, [url](#)

¹³⁷ IRB, 02/03/2023, [url](#)

¹³⁸ CNN (Abdelaziz S.), 21/04/2023, [url](#)

¹³⁹ AI, 24/06/2021, [url](#); USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 02/06/2022, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰ IranWire (Yousefi H.), 19/07/2021, [url](#)

¹⁴¹ The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

¹⁴² SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#); اینترنشنال ایران [Iran International] (@IranIntl), 29/11/2022, [url](#); ABC News (Fazal M.), 04/11/2022, [url](#); The New Arab, 03/07/2023, [url](#)

¹⁴³ CNN (Abdelaziz S.), 21/04/2023, [url](#); AI, 07/04/2022, [url](#); UNHRC, 19/03/2024, pp. 383, [url](#); UCLA, 21/05/2023, [url](#); IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴ ABC News (Brown R., Fazal M.), 03/02/2023, [url](#); Sahar Gholizadeh [LinkedIn profile], s.d., [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ ABC News (Fazal M.), 04/11/2022, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶ Sasan Amjadi [X], s.d., [url](#); IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#); Haifaasadi [Instagram profile], s.d., [url](#); SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#); Marybanihashemi [Instagram profile], s.d., [url](#)

¹⁴⁷ Maryam Banihashemi [Linktree], s.d., [url](#); SRF (Horlacher M.-B.), 21/10/2022, [url](#); IRB, 02/03/2023, [url](#); DIS, 06/2024, p. 29, [url](#); UNHRC, 19/03/2024, pp. 383, [url](#); CNN (Abdelaziz S.), 21/04/2023, [url](#); IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#); IranWire, 25/05/2023, [url](#); IranWire, 20/08/2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸ IRB, 02/03/2023, [url](#); ABC News (Brown R., Fazal M.), 03/02/2023, [url](#); IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#); IranWire (Yari P.), 10/05/2024, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹ IranWire (Rezaei R.), 27/03/2024, [url](#)

Cases falling outside the categories put forward by Dr Maghzi include the case of Alaa Heidari, an Arab converted to Sunnism engaged in online proselytizing activities,¹⁵⁰ and the case of the two men who were filmed during a protest in Brussels against the visit of the mayor of Tehran.¹⁵¹ As to the case of Medis, an outspoken activist and doctor living in a European capital,¹⁵² and the cases of the six expatriate Iranian Christians¹⁵³ and of several anti-regime protesters in Australia¹⁵⁴, they contain little information on their profiles and activities.

¹⁵⁰ AI, 24/06/2021, [url](#); USDOS – Office of International Religious Freedom, 02/06/2022, [url](#)

¹⁵¹ IranWire (Shams O.), 04/07/2023, [url](#)

¹⁵² The Independent (Daraghi B.), 13/02/2023, [url](#)

¹⁵³ Article 18 et al., 19/02/2023, p. 10, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ The Guardian (Hurst D.), 14/02/2023, [url](#)

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