

Transnational Repression: a Global Threat to Rights and Security

Testimony by Nicole Bibbins Sedaca

Executive Vice President, Freedom House

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing
Transnational Repression and the US Response
February 15, 2024

Congressman McGovern, Congressman Smith, and members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It has been a privilege to work with you and your staff on this important issue, and we greatly appreciate your leadership.

Transnational repression occurs when states reach across borders to silence dissent from activists, journalists, and others living in exile, by using intimidation and violence. Through transnational repression, states seek to apply abroad the same restrictions on rights they impose at home. It is a threat to the rights of targeted individuals and communities, and it undermines democracy by limiting people's ability to participate in civic life, including here in the United States. Transnational repression demands a coordinated response from the United States and other democratic governments.

From 2014 through 2022, Freedom House has collected information on 854 direct, physical incidents (assassination, kidnapping, assault, detention, or deportation) of transnational repression around the world, committed by 38 governments in 91 countries. During this time, 13 states have engaged in assassinations abroad, and 30 have conducted renditions. Freedom House will be releasing updated database numbers tomorrow at the Munich Security Conference. Every year we have added new perpetrator governments and new incidents, showing that transnational repression is not diminishing.

Unsurprisingly, technology has played an enormous role in the transformation and expansion of transnational repression. Digital platforms and services have increased the reach of states beyond their borders, allowing them to surveil, track, harass, and target individuals through social media platforms and personal devices.

According to our database, the top ten perpetrators of transnational repression globally are China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Egypt, Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Belarus, and Rwanda. Together, these ten countries are responsible for 80 percent of the cases in our database. And China, which conducts the most comprehensive and sophisticated campaign of transnational repression in the world, is responsible for 30 percent of the cases.

A recent and worrying development is the extraterritorial repression of reporters, a trend captured in our December report, entitled *A Light That Cannot Be Extinguished: Exiled Journalism and Transnational Repression*. As the space for free media and dissent has closed in authoritarian countries, governments are increasingly targeting exiled journalists who continue their courageous work from abroad. At least 26 governments have targeted journalists, and 112 of the 854 cases in our database – thirteen percent of all cases – involved journalists.

Transnational repression is also an everyday threat on US campuses, a development outlined in our January report, *Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States*. International students and scholars experience digital and physical surveillance, harassment, assault, threats and coercion by proxy – or the harassment of family members. Very few institutions are prepared to address this threat, and the lack of awareness has left targeted individuals to try to deal with the problem themselves and created a significant chilling effect.

The impact of transnational repression on targeted individuals is severe - people's physical safety, travel, homes, online presence, and family safety are deeply compromised. Each individual incident of transnational repression produces ripple effects throughout the community, fostering an atmosphere of fear and suspicion among neighbors and compatriots.

Transnational repression poses a global threat to rights and security and a challenge for both domestic and foreign policy. Democratic societies are challenged to decide if they can and will protect the rights of people inside our borders against such intimidation. Autocrats are betting we are not willing to bear the cost of doing so. We must prove them wrong.

There has been strong, bipartisan interest in addressing this issue in the United States and growing interest from democracies in Europe and elsewhere. The current administration has made addressing transnational repression a priority across agencies. We have five core recommendations:

- 1) Codify a definition of transnational repression in law and ensure the United States has the necessary legal authorities to sufficiently address the threat and support those who are targeted.
- 2) Work with the Executive Branch and with State and local officials to ensure that personnel who encounter perpetrators and victims of transnational repression receive the training necessary to recognize and respond to the threat and assist victims.
- 3) Review current information-sharing practices to ensure efficient communication within and between agencies and with trusted partners and allies.
- 4) Establish clear pathways for exiled human rights defenders to receive temporary relocation or permanent legal status when needed, including providing special visas, such as humanitarian visas or visas for human rights defenders, activists, and journalists, to help them receive legal status for temporary or permanent relocation.
- 5) Urge the Executive Branch to continue to raise transnational repression as a priority issue with democratic partners and with allies, including at the highest levels with perpetrators of transnational repression, even when they are close partners such as Saudi Arabia and India.

Again, thank you for your leadership. I look forward to your questions.