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Perspectives on "Everyday" Transnational Repression in an Age of Globalization

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PERSPECTIVES ON "EVERYDAY" TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ON THE COVER

Activist at a demonstration in Makassar, Indonesia holds a poster with a picture of Jamal Khashoggi. Editorial credit: Herwin Bahar / Shutterstock.com.

Introduction

by Nate Schenkkan, *Director for Special Research, Freedom House*

People gather in Paris in protest of Rwandan president Paul Kagame. Editorial credit: Ian Langsdon/EPA/Shutterstock

Transnational repression is a term used to describe how countries silence their exiles and diasporas abroad. It encompasses a spectrum of tactics, from assassinations, to renditions, to spyware, to intimidation of exiles' family members who have stayed behind. As a transnational phenomenon, it is inseparable from broader trends of globalization. States employ the tactics of transnational repression within patterns of international mobility and finance, through legal institutions that regulate migration and citizenship, and via digital technologies that enable instantaneous and constant communication across borders.

This means that transnational repression is also embedded in "global authoritarianism": the adaptation of authoritarian states to global capitalism and the existing international order following the shock of the end of the Cold War.[1] Unlike during the Cold War, modern authoritarianism does not seek to shield itself from the international order but to integrate

with it and rebuild it from the inside.[2] One of the purposes of this integration for states that explicitly sabotage demands for accountability and transparency from their citizens *within* their borders is to impose authoritarian controls upon them *beyond* their borders. Through transnational repression, authoritarian states seek to maintain control over diasporas and exiles, migrants, international students, and others, extending the sphere of authoritarian governance beyond their sovereign boundaries.

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This collection of essays seeks to elaborate on the issues raised by transnational repression as a widespread phenomenon embedded within globalization. The purpose of the collection is to provide policymakers, human rights activists, and journalists with perspectives on the pressures that emigrants, exiles, and diasporas experience from their countries of origin, the lesser-known tactics they face, and to provoke thinking about how to address transnational repression.

The first and second essays explore the most widespread, but somewhat underdiscussed, mechanisms of transnational repression—what one might call "everyday" transnational repression, because of how ubiquitous it is. In his essay, Marcus Michaelsen explains the importance of digital tools in this discussion. All activists in the twenty-first century rely on digital media and tools, but exiles and diasporic communities are even more reliant on these due to their physical estrangement from their origin countries. Digital repression is a serious risk in an era where activists must use social media and digital communication tools to conduct their work, and where a person's private life is fully intertwined with other facets of their digital existence. Even in the infamous case of Saudi Arabia's murder of the international journalist Jamal Khashoggi, sophisticated digital spyware deployed across borders was an underappreciated component of the violent plot on his life. Michaelsen's contribution also highlights the role that private spyware companies have played in enabling transnational repression, extending the opportunity for abuses to countries that would otherwise have lacked the technical capacity to target their enemies abroad.

In the second essay, Fiona Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas lay out a typology for understanding another widespread form of transnational repression: *coercion-by-proxy*, or pressure on exiles' family members, associates, or acquaintances who remain in the origin country. Adamson and Tsourapas divide coercion-by-proxy into the categories of punishment, deterrence, and compellence, which feed into "the creation of a climate of fear and control in the diaspora." Such a method is "low-cost" for authoritarian regimes because it does not require violating another state's sovereignty, and frequently escapes the same level of international scrutiny that other methods might attract.

In the third essay, Dana Moss elaborates on the effects of transnational repression on the role that exiles and diasporas play in support of democracy and human rights in their origin countries. Diaspora activists can be important advocates for their communities by holding their origin states accountable, spreading information, assisting dissidents, and even pressing for legal redress in international forums. Yet, transnational repression tactics can be effective in intimidating diasporas from engaging in activism. Even where diasporas become mobilized, often at times of national crisis, transnational repression techniques sow mistrust among groups, splintering their efforts and making coordinated action harder to sustain. The result, Moss writes, is that origin states "effectively cow the majority of the diaspora into silence." In line with Adamson and Tsourapas, Moss argues that transnational repression is widespread because it is low-cost in terms of political capital and actual expenditures, and because it works.

Finally, in the last essay, Saipira Furstenberg, Tena Prelec, and John Heathershaw widen the discussion by placing transnational repression within the larger framework of authoritarian influence, through an examination of the ways that authoritarian states are able to use higher education as a means to control discourse and dissent beyond their borders. The internationalization of higher education—in many ways a positive development through the opportunities it presents for international research, exchange, and knowledge-sharing—also is a vehicle for transnational repression and authoritarian influence. International students and faculty

abroad become both targets of pressure and tools for its use against others, resulting in self-censorship on sensitive topics even among people not affiliated with the diaspora in question. Fieldwork in authoritarian environments can become a vehicle for repression that, in turn, shapes how the broader academic community engages with a topic. And lucrative satellite campuses opened in authoritarian states often come packaged with implicit restrictions on speech that, in turn, circulate back to the university's home country. All of these components work together to degrade the quality of academic freedom on topics sensitive to authoritarian states that involve themselves in higher education.

As raised in this fourth essay, the enmeshment of transnational repression in globalization raises difficult policy-response questions. An attractively simple solution to global authoritarianism would seem to be *decoupling*: separating democracies from authoritarian states, economically, technologically, and socially. Policy in the United States, at least under the current presidential administration, appears to be inclining in this direction regarding China.[3] Some measures of decoupling may be valid in order to avoid strategic threats to democracies, such as increasing scrutiny of imported technology in key future infrastructure like 5G.

In examining decoupling through the lens of transnational repression, however, one can see how grave the human rights consequences of pursuing indiscriminate, security-focused policies of separation would be. The only foolproof way to protect a diaspora or exiles from targeting by their origin country would be wholesale disconnection, shutting down all means by which states reach their diasporas. This would require increasing state power even more to monitor what contacts diasporas may maintain outside of the community, and what means they can use to do so. Eventually, it would also require restricting even further the ability of people to move across national borders, using data collection methods necessitating greater and greater intrusions into privacy. Such a shift would also further embolden the most illiberal versions of ethnonationalism, with dire consequences for minorities and noncitizens inside democracies. Finally, decoupling in order to protect democracies would shut down the opportunity for democracies to exert influence in authoritarian states. The result would be a new Iron Curtain, abandoning those living under authoritarianism, and forgoing the positive changes of the post–Cold War era in international solidarity, international protection of human rights, and the spread of democratic norms and practices.

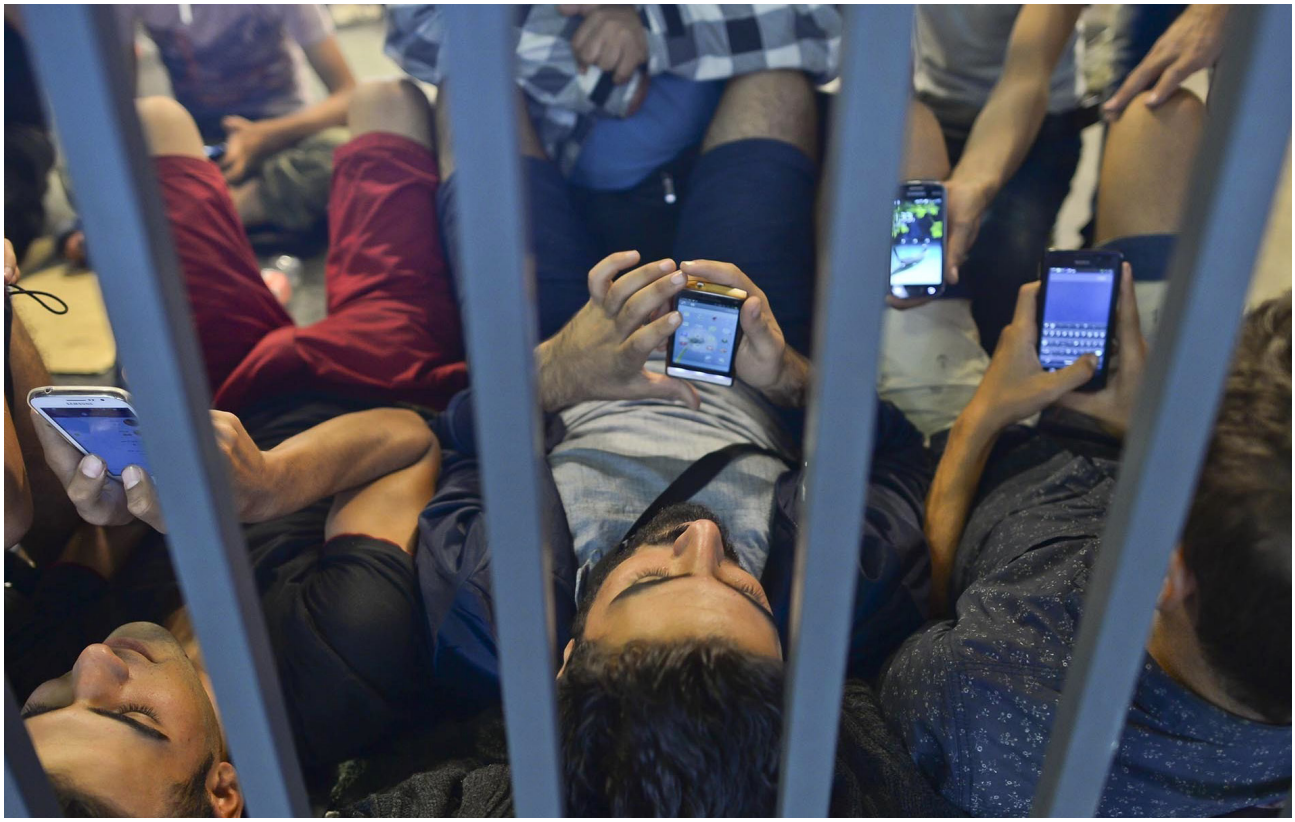
Instead, the essays in this collection point to the importance of deepening and strengthening solidarity across borders. Better defenses against transnational repression are a matter of strengthening and increasing connections, not cutting them. Building networks of support and trust, especially among civil society groups, strengthens the sources of resilience that diasporas rely on to push back against transnational repression. Michaelsen's and Moss's pieces emphasize the importance of longer-term interventions and support for exiles and diasporas in order to protect them against digital forms of transnational repression. Adamson and Tsourapas, in their essay, emphasize how transnational repression challenges the current country-based reporting of human rights groups (including Freedom House) by calling for more investigations based on "practices" rather than country studies. Regarding higher education, a group of parliamentarians, civil society groups, and academics in the United Kingdom—including those who have been subject to transnational repression—are working together to build a code of conduct to institute greater protections for students and faculty as well as accountability in international university partnerships.

Better defenses against transnational repression are a matter of strengthening and increasing connections, not cutting them.

States that host diasporic communities also have a role to play: in supporting such projects of solidarity, including by empowering immigrant communities; in building trust with diasporas in order to keep them safe from targeting; and in shutting down the networks of enablers, like private spyware contractors, that facilitate attacks on dissidents and encourage the spread of dangerous digital tools. To confront global authoritarianism, the default posture should be to deepen democratic solidarity within democracies and with those living in non-democracies, instead of trying to cut ourselves off from them.

The Digital Transnational Repression Toolkit, and Its Silencing Effects

by Marcus Michaelsen



Refugees use their phones at a Budapest Railway station. Editorial credit: Artur Widak / Nurphoto / Shutterstock

In summer 2018, the smartphone of a man named Omar Abdulaziz was infected with a powerful spyware. The Pegasus surveillance tool, produced by the Israeli NSO Group, gave the attackers access to Abdulaziz's personal files, emails, and messages; they were able to monitor his communications and movements. A Saudi political activist living in Canada, Omar Abdulaziz was a close associate of Jamal Khashoggi, an outspoken journalist who had left Saudi Arabia for the United States in 2017 after falling out of favor with the authorities. Both men frequently discussed the human rights situation in their home country, and together they started developing a project for social media campaigns against Saudi government propaganda. A few months after the hacking of Abdulaziz's phone, Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, in an operation coordinated by high-level officials of the government in Riyadh, most likely even Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman himself.[1]

Oppressive rulers have time and again resorted to murder to get rid of exiled political opponents. But, in the case of Khashoggi, the crime was prepared with the help of twenty-first-century surveillance technology, which NSO Group may have sold to more than 45 countries around the world.[2] An investigation by The Citizen Lab, a research institute at

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the University of Toronto, established that the spyware on Abdulaziz's smartphone was indeed operated from Saudi Arabia.[3] It had also been used to infiltrate the devices of other Saudi human rights defenders based abroad[4] as well as potential foreign critics, such as the *New York Times* Middle East correspondent Ben Hubbard.[5] Digital technologies have given authoritarian governments new tools to control, silence, and punish dissent across borders. They enable regimes to monitor and respond to the activities of political exiles and diaspora communities with greater scope and speed, reducing the costs of extraterritorial political control. Digital technologies have thus become essential components in the toolkit of transnational repression.

Civil society has certainly benefited from digital technologies to inform, collaborate, and mobilize. For diaspora activists engaging for political change in their country of origin, digital technologies are key to communicate with contacts at home, maintain professional relations, and advocate against rights violations. Yet, as digital security researcher John Scott-Railton puts it, for civil society, "the capacity to connect has vastly outpaced the ability to secure."[6] Activists' reliance on digital platforms and social media creates multiple points of exposure that authoritarian regimes exploit to prepare, deliver, and intensify threats across borders. Digital attacks via malware, online harassment, and disinformation campaigns are often intertwined with more traditional methods of transnational repression, such as pressure on families inside the country, smear campaigns in state media, or, as the Khashoggi case demonstrates, even assassinations.

This piece describes widespread methods of digital transnational repression, as well as their constraining effects on diaspora activism. It mainly draws on a project investigating digital threats against exiled activists from Iran, Syria, and Egypt, but it is also informed by broader research into the practices and trends of extraterritorial authoritarian rule.[7] The following outlines the ways in which digital surveillance, hacking attacks, and online harassment affect the freedom, autonomy, and privacy of activists by encouraging self-censorship and by creeping into their ties and networks. The conclusion gives recommendations on how to curtail the impact of digitally enabled transnational repression and strengthen the resilience of diaspora activists.

From covert monitoring to targeted threats

Digital communication technologies expose diaspora activists to monitoring and surveillance from regime authorities. As avid social media users, activists leave online traces about their activities travel, conference participations, family members, friends, and collaborators. With professional and personal identities converging on social media profiles, security agents find ample opportunity to gather so-called open-source intelligence: publicly available information that can be used to manipulate and pressure targeted persons.[8] Activists' contacts with colleagues and relatives inside the home country create an additional opportunity for intercepting confidential communications as messages travel, at least partly, through infrastructure under regime control. Intelligence agencies also monitor the programs of international and exiled media to track the work of journalists and activists' media appearances. Human rights defenders from Syria and Egypt, for instance, understood that their participation in the Arabic-language programs of foreign media stations had put them on the radar of security agents after their parents and fellow activists at home were interrogated.[9]

Digital technologies have given authoritarian governments new tools to control, silence, and punish dissent across borders.

Civil society activists have become increasingly aware of their digital security and rely on encryption, anonymous browsing, and other protections. In response, however, state actors resort to more aggressive measures of targeted surveillance.[10] By penetrating computers, mobile devices, email, and social media accounts, they aim to gain access to confidential communications and contacts. Attacks often involve some form of social engineering, with perpetrators working to trick targets into opening a malicious link or attachment by impersonating a friend or an organization associated with their field of expertise.[11] Such phishing attempts have been delivered via invitations to seminars, files on human rights violations, and interview requests, not only through email but also in messages on Facebook, WhatsApp, and other channels.[12] Once successfully executed, these operations provide remote access to a target's device or reveal sensitive passwords.[13]

A number of repressive governments have engaged in large-scale phishing campaigns against civil society, both inside and outside their territory.[14] Not all governments can afford or have access to the advanced commercial surveillance technology that a growing global market offers. Instead, they rely on techniques of cybercrime and open-source malware. But a lack of sophisticated tools and expertise is compensated for by assiduous information gathering and target manipulation—tasks that the intelligence organizations of authoritarian regimes are well versed in. Attacks build on the ties among activists to unravel entire groups and networks.[15] In order to encircle high-profile targets, regime agents try to infiltrate the accounts of lesser-known and inexperienced users in activist networks—or even family members. A prominent Iranian women's rights campaigner recalled how she was contacted in London through the Facebook profile of her niece from Iran, which had apparently been hacked by security agents, in order to reveal the access credentials for her own social media accounts. Security agents also use the online identities of individuals arrested inside the country to swiftly approach their international contacts before the arrest becomes public.[16]

> Digital attacks via malware, online harassment, and disinformation campaigns are often intertwined with more traditional methods of transnational repression.

Other than surveillance, authoritarian regimes use online harassment, disinformation, and smear campaigns to pressure and silence outspoken dissidents abroad. 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. In campaigns that aim to undermine their credibility and taint their reputation, journalists and human rights defenders are portrayed as liars, accused of working for foreign powers, or attacked on moral grounds.[17] These campaigns also exert psychological pressure, intimidating with threats of physical violence, assassination, and arrest upon return to the country.[18] Female journalists and activists are particularly targeted with degrading, misogynistic, and sexually violent insults.[19] Threats are also issued against in-country family members. An Iranian journalist based in Washington, DC, reported that, in an online comment under one of her articles, she was warned that her uncle in Tehran might have an accident, even mentioning his home address.

Some of these attacks may come organically from regime supporters, but others are clearly government coordinated. Russia, China, Turkey, and many others have organized groups of trolls to be unleashed against critics in concerted campaigns.[20] These "electronic flies," as pro-regime social media accounts were dubbed by Saudi-Arabian activists, diffuse propaganda and even take over the identities of government opponents to disseminate disinformation under their name.[21] Moreover, regimes abuse the features of social media to drown out topics and manipulate online discussions. Automated bots and fake accounts amplify Twitter hashtags promoting regime positions or hijack those of the opposition.[22]

In their efforts to shut down online criticism and alternative information, regimes not only take aim at individuals in the diaspora but also at the websites of media and civil society organizations based abroad. Although these publications are often already blocked for audiences in the home country of activists, they also come under more aggressive attacks. Regime-affiliated hackers, such as the self-proclaimed Syrian Electronic Army[23] or Iranian threat actors,[24] have disrupted the services of media and opposition websites with defacements and Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) campaigns. Facebook profiles of civil society organizations get blocked after being flagged in massive false reports of their violating the rules of the platform. Members of an Egyptian human rights campaign based in Turkey mentioned that their Facebook event for European-wide protests against President Sisi was taken down after government supporters flocked together to report the page as sexual harassment.

Activists point out that all these attempts to disable the online expression of diaspora and exiled communities often increase in times of political tension, protests, or elections.

The silencing effects of digital transnational repression

By targeting dissidents and critics abroad, authoritarian regimes aim to extend the influence of their security apparatus across borders and impose additional costs on the activities of transnational civil society. With their arsenal of

digital threats, regime agents can pressure activists into self-restraint, undermine their ties to the home country, and put them under extreme tension and stress.

The knowledge or assumption of ongoing regime surveillance pushes many activists towards self-censorship. The uncertainty about the capabilities of monitoring authorities and the scope of their activities clearly has a chilling effect. Egyptian human rights defenders who organized a protest during one of President Sisi's visits to Germany explained that some group members participated only in disguise, wearing sunglasses, hats, or even a wig, for fear of being photographed by security agents or pictures of the event circulating online. Other activists abstain from media appearances or carefully weigh their statements when participating in public events so as not to catch the attention of regime authorities.

Fear for relatives and colleagues forces many exiles to carefully manage their ties to the home country. In case their communications are being monitored, some activists circumnavigate critical topics in their conversations; others deliberately refrain from collaborating with in-country contacts. In any case, they forgo a key resource: the ability to gather authentic information from the ground to leverage against the regime in international media and advocacy organizations. An Iranian journalist working for a diaspora news website explained that he had given up on many connections that would have helped him to stay in touch with the country. "I am not only losing friends but also access to information sources," he said. "The quality of my work suffers."[25]

The threat of targeted surveillance and other intrusions puts activists under pressure to effectively protect their contacts and communications. Not only do they have to stay up to date with the rapidly evolving methods of attack and deception, but they also make daily security decisions knowing they are up against resourceful state actors. The complexity of today's digital tools and platforms further complicates any understanding of the technical underpinnings of the threats they might be facing. Activists often feel uncertain in choosing the right tools and layers of protection. A Syrian digital security trainer based in Germany pointed out that this constant tension could lead to a "security paralysis": "If you think about all the possibilities of getting hacked, then it can result in this attitude: OK, I will get hacked anyway."[26]

The risk of mental stress and burnout is even higher for activists targeted by online harassment and hate speech. A Syrian journalist and trainer working to support female journalists explained that colleagues who had gone through a wave of trolling and threats online felt physically affected and were "thinking twice" before voicing their opinion again. As a result, the number of outspoken women in Syrian opposition media and civil society networks had decreased.[27]

Reaching across borders with the digital tools of transnational repression, authoritarian regimes are able to intervene in activists' everyday routines and constrain some of the dynamics, impacts, and outreach of diaspora activism. Digital threats are often carried out with little chance to identify perpetrators and hold them to account. Moreover, regimes can escalate these threats into other forms of transnational repression in the attempt to punish exiled dissidents for crossing a red line and shut them up. After gathering material on the media campaign of a human rights advocate, for example, they may decide to interrogate her parents in the home country. They may also use a journalist's intercepted private communications for slander in state-controlled media. The methods in the toolkit of transnational repression are clearly intertwined and build upon each other. Digital technologies therefore extend the scope and scale of repressive practices against political exiles.

The knowledge or assumption of ongoing regime surveillance pushes many activists towards self-censorship.

Countering digital transnational repression

To support activists in mitigating the risks of digital threats from repressive state actors, it is important to build their digital resilience, constrain the proliferation of surveillance technology, and involve the institutions and resources of societies hosting exiles and diasporas.

With ties across countries and communities, exiled human rights defenders and journalists are part of transnational networks in which a successful attack against the weakest link could lead to severe consequences for all involved. Consequently, the resilience and security of these activists

should be thought of in terms of relationships and networks. Risk awareness and knowledge on fundamental practices of digital security within civil society have certainly increased within civil society. Yet activists from authoritarian contexts operate in an environment of swiftly shifting technical and political risks, relying on commercial applications not designed for high-risk users. One-time trainings are not enough to equip individuals and organizations against emerging threats to their information security.

> The resilience and security of activists should be thought of in terms of relationships and networks.

It is therefore vital to build forms of long-term accompaniment embedding activists and their organizations in arrangements of persistent support and advice. Strong communities of practice will make it easier to share information on threats and provide emergency response and assistance, as well as education on information security. Building coalitions to connect larger, international organizations with smaller, local groups and regional networks will allow support to be properly and rapidly scaled, while also offering natural and trusted contact points for activists on the frontlines.

The global spread of intrusive surveillance technology has caused serious harm to civil society worldwide. It should be constrained. Saudi Arabia's targeting of dissidents abroad exemplifies how authoritarian powerholders abuse sophisticated spyware to violate human rights, within and beyond their territories. NSO Group, the company behind the surveillance tool deployed against Omar Abdulaziz and fellow activists, is but one household name within a thriving and shadowy private industry.[28] David Kaye, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, considered the threat of commercial surveillance technology so grave that he has called for a moratorium on its global sale, transfer, and use until rigorous human rights safeguards have been put in place.[29]

Strict rules and independent oversight are needed to bring transparency and accountability into the market for spyware. Companies should follow due diligence procedures throughout the entire chain of development and sales; export licenses should be made conditional upon independent human rights review. Government use of surveillance technology needs to be subject to public debate and critical investigation, and there must be mechanisms for sanctions and redress in cases of abuse. Companies providing surveillance tools that interfere with the rights of targets should be named and shamed, and their deceptive practices targeted by strategic litigation.[30]

Political emigrants who feel harassed and threatened from their home regimes should get the support of the societies they have turned to in order to escape repression in the first place. The media and human rights organizations can play an important role in documenting and raising awareness on practices of transnational repression. Governments in democratic host societies should be more alert to the methods of authoritarian rulers exporting repression abroad. Some countries have developed legal instruments to penalize more blatant transgressions, such as the abuse of Interpol or refugee espionage. But law enforcement agencies should be enabled to deal with the broader range of threats too. Cybercrime laws, for instance, could be used to thwart targeted surveillance and hacking attacks on civil society.

With a deep understanding of their home country, as well as contacts to international organizations, media, and policy circles, exiled activists occupy a strategic position to challenge unaccountable and illiberal regimes from afar. Authoritarian powerholders seek to silence these voices, building on methods such as surveillance, hacking devices, and online harassment. They instrumentalize digital technologies to amplify their control over citizens and information flows beyond borders. As a consequence of their invasive methods, civil society's continued ability to use digital tools to freely exchange, coordinate, and organize is in danger. These malign practices should be seen as actions undertaken by increasingly assertive authoritarian states extending their reach to undermine civil liberties abroad. They are a threat to human rights, and need to be responded to accordingly.

AT HOME AND ABROAD:

Coercion-by-Proxy as a Tool of Transnational Repression

by Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas

Chinese Uyghurs demonstrate in Istanbul, Turkey. Editorial credit: Lefteris Pitarakis / AP / Shutterstock

Transnational authoritarianism is characterized by the breaking down of the boundaries between state-led domestic forms of control over citizens living "at home" and long-distance forms of repression targeting those who reside "abroad." When an authoritarian state employs strategies of transnational repression, it seeks to coerce those living outside its legal borders. Victims of transnational repression can include not only prominent individuals, such as political exiles, journalists, and émigrés, but also entire groups, such as students, labor migrants, or refugees. State-led forms of transnational repression can also extend to a country's diaspora, including noncitizens with interests in or connections to the homeland.

Strategies of transnational repression can target individuals abroad via harassment, surveillance, enactment of mobility restrictions, or even more serious instances of kidnapping, physical attack, or assassination. However, authoritarian

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states may encounter obstacles in their ability to engage in direct forms of transnational repression: targeting individuals abroad can have high costs when it violates the sovereignty of powerful states. It may also raise diplomatic concerns or draw unwanted public attention to countries' human rights practices, as well as generate undesired media coverage.

Alternatively, autocracies use strategies that involve long-distance *coercion-by-proxy*. In such cases, governments operate within their territory and jurisdiction to target the family members, associates, or acquaintances of individuals living abroad. In effect, states use domestic forms of repression as a means of punishing, threatening, or controlling those who reside overseas. This can be considered a "low cost" form of transnational repression in that it neither violates the sovereignty of other states nor is it likely to garner significant levels of diplomatic or media attention.

The harassment of dissidents' family members or acquaintances has long been used as a method of political control in authoritarian states: the personal networks of dissidents are often investigated or targeted by autocracies' security agencies seeking to identify, punish, or silence political activists. When the Soviet Union stripped dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn of his citizenship, the daily *Izvestiia* warned that his family members were next.[1] Similarly, the Marcos regime in the Philippines harassed the family and relatives of Filipinos in the United States during the 1970s as a means of exercising leverage over them.[2]

In effect, states use domestic forms of repression as a means of punishing, threatening, or controlling those who reside overseas.

What is new—and of particular interest for understanding the dynamics of transnational authoritarianism—is the extent to which these strategies have "gone global." For one, international migration has facilitated citizens' mobility into and out of autocratic states.[3] At the same time, new information and communications technologies (ICTs) have led to the globalization of many aspects of domestic politics, and the rise of diaspora politics.[4] Diasporic activism operates largely outside the jurisdiction of the state of origin and has therefore often been assumed to be a space of opportunity for political opposition movements and groups, where they can operate without interference from homeland state authorities.[5]

Yet, the transnationalization of politics has been accompanied by the transnationalization of family ties, social relations, and social networks, which perversely has provided an additional source of leverage for states to engage in transnational repression. New forms of digital surveillance—such as monitoring social media accounts, private communications, and text messages—mean that authoritarian states can quickly identify the ties between activists abroad and family members and acquaintances "back home." Thus, whereas actors in the diaspora may be outside the direct reach of repressive states, their friends and relatives can still become targets of state coercion-by-proxy.[6]

In order to understand this dimension of transnational repression, we first examine the ways in which states employ coercion-by-proxy strategies—as instruments of punishment, deterrence, compellence, and control. We then discuss the global scope of such strategies and their range of targets, before reflecting on possible means of addressing this challenge.

Coercion-by-Proxy as a Strategy of Transnational Repression

Coercion-by-proxy constitutes the actual or threatened use of physical or other sanctions against an individual *within* the territorial jurisdiction of a state, for the purpose of repressing a target individual residing *outside* its territorial jurisdiction. It may involve visible, high-intensity tactics based on the use of violence, such as imprisonment, physical attacks, disappearances, or even assassination; it may also include less visible, low-intensity tactics, such as threats, surveillance, or restrictions on an individual's freedoms.

Coercion-by-proxy is used by a variety of authoritarian states and operates according to a range of logics, including *punishment*, *deterrence*, *compellence*, and *control*.[7] *Punishment* involves retribution for acts committed by targets abroad; *deterrence* involves using threats of punishment to prevent actions by targets abroad, thus increasing their perceived costs; *compellence* involves using threats of punishment in order to coerce targets abroad into specific behaviors or actions. Taken together, these three

logics of coercion-by-proxy extend autocracies' *control* over those abroad by normalizing group-level self-censorship and self-policing across the diaspora.

Dana Moss has defined "proxy punishment" as "the harassment, physical confinement, and/or bodily harm of relatives in the home-country as a means of information gathering and retribution against dissidents abroad."[8] Punishment involves the targeting of families or relatives in the homeland in retaliation for specific actions taken by dissidents, opposition members, journalists, or other key figures in the diaspora. In the case of Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim, for instance, the arrest of his brother came a few days after Wael Ghonim rejected a request by the Egyptian embassy in Washington, DC, to "go silent or work with them."[9] His is not an isolated case, however. Between 2016 and 2019, twenty-nine Egyptian journalists and media workers, as well as political and human rights activists living abroad, had family members in Egypt targeted by the regime.[10] Elsewhere in the Middle East, when Mohammed al-Fazari, an Omani human rights defender and blogger, defied a travel ban and sought asylum in the United Kingdom, authorities targeted his family: in 2015, his brother was detained for three weeks without charge while, in 2017, al-Fazari's family was barred from traveling abroad.[11]

An additional variant of coercion-by-proxy is the use of threats to domestic family or acquaintances as a means of either deterring or compelling actions in the diaspora. In the first case, autocracies issue warnings and engage in acts of intimidation as a preventive form of coercion-by-proxy. Deterrence is used to alter the cost-benefit calculations of those living abroad by creating fear and anxiety around the well-being of their family members in the country of origin. For example, North Korea seeks to prevent the defection of workers abroad by effectively holding their families hostage. Some three thousand North Koreans work in Qatar where "almost all of the wages of the workers sent abroad are remitted back to Kim Jong-un's regime."[12] This "global moneymaking scheme" for the North Korean regime "takes in anywhere from $200 million to $2 billion a year."[13] The majority of the workers "are married men with at least one child, even better, two children. Of course, the families are kept at home as hostages, as insurance to make sure that these workers do not defect." Similarly, the Iranian women's rights activist Mansoureh Shojaee has suggested that people are "held hostage in Iran" in order to curtail the activities of political activists abroad and to prevent them from advocating against human rights violations.[14]

Together with other forms of transnational repression, the use or threat of punishment-by-proxy can lead to high levels of self-censorship and self-policing within the diaspora.

Compellence involves the opposite dynamics, namely, the use of threats against family members and colleagues in order to force an individual to undertake particular actions, including halting particular activities. Chinese students in the United States have reported that their family members have been threatened with the loss of their jobs if the students do not cease political activism.[15] One Uyghur factory worker in the Netherlands stated that Chinese policemen obtained his phone number from his relatives in Xinjiang in November 2014, and forced his brother to call him: then, "they took over the phone call and told me that I had to provide information on other Uyghurs in the Netherlands. Otherwise they would take my brother."[16] This extends beyond providing information on other individuals: "The Chinese spy services are literally threatening Chinese families," U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee Vice Chairman Mark Warner has stated. Echoing FBI Director Christopher Wray's claim that Chinese students are compelled to steal research and technological advancements from the United States, Senator Warner further asserted, "If your son or daughter does not come back [from the U.S.] and come back with intellectual property, you the family will be put in jeopardy."[17]

The use of long-distance coercion-by-proxy instruments against individuals for the purposes of punishment, deterrence, and compellence can all feed into the creation of a larger climate of fear and control in the diaspora, affecting not just individuals but entire populations. Together with other forms of transnational repression, the use or threat of punishment-by-proxy can lead to high levels of self-censorship and self-policing within the diaspora. Bui Thanh Hieu, a Vietnamese blogger living in exile in Germany, decided to quit blogging due to the Vietnamese authorities' harassment of relatives back home, including his 86-year-old mother, who is currently hospitalized.[18] In the case of Syria, those who have fled the Assad regime highlight a totalitarian-style state repression that has produced "a disposition of silence . . . carried beyond the homeland."[19]

The Global Scope of Coercion-by-Proxy

State-led coercion-by-proxy strategies that are designed to punish, deter, compel, and, ultimately, control individuals or populations abroad are widespread and characterized by their global scope. An increase in states' abilities to engage in long-distance surveillance and harassment, coupled with a global resurgence of illiberal politics, suggests the need for greater attention to the use of coercion-by-proxy as a strategy of transnational repression.

One group of actors that is frequently targeted includes *political exiles* and *regime dissenters*. For example, when Uyghur political activist Rushan Abbas spoke at a think tank in Washington, DC, about the repression faced by Uyghur Muslims in China, her sister and aunt in Xinjiang disappeared within a week. Abbas is one of many Uyghur Americans who have had family members in China detained or harassed as part of what appears to be a coordinated strategy to silence political activists in the Uyghur diaspora.[20] Rwandan political exiles have expressed concern about their private communications with family members and acquaintances being intercepted as part of state strategies of harassment and leading to subsequent targeting of individuals back home.[21] Relatives of Emirati political dissidents have faced restrictions on their access to any employment opportunities or higher education: "Whenever the family tried to dig deeper to understand why the government was denying access to a service or holding an application pending indefinitely," one Emirati dissident abroad reported, "they would be told, verbally only, that the obstruction was happening at the state security level."[22] Kurdish political activists in Europe have reported cases in which their relatives have been threatened or attacked, including at least one case of the murder of elderly parents by suspected government-linked death squads.[23]

Coercion-by-proxy can also be used to target and control entire groups abroad, such as students, labor migrants, and ordinary members of the diaspora.

At the same time, *whistleblowers* and *journalists* writing on homeland politics can also become targets of state-led coercion-by-proxy strategies. The exiled Turkish journalist Can Dündar claimed that his wife in Turkey was being treated "like a hostage" by the Turkish state, unable to leave Turkey and fearing for her life,[24] a story that matches reports by a number of journalists whose relatives were detained or harassed after they fled Turkey.[25] In the case of Europe-based Tajik journalist Humayra Bakhtiyar, police called her father to convince his daughter to return to Tajikistan or face losing his job as a schoolteacher, as he had "no moral right to teach children if he was unable to raise his own daughter properly."[26] The Iranian regime targeted the father of journalist Masih Alinejad, who campaigns for women's rights online. As she reported, "nine times they took him and told him that his daughter is morally corrupt, that she is against Islam, she works with Israel against our country. My father doesn't talk to me anymore."[27] The exiled Egyptian whistleblower Mohamed Ali has produced videos on alleged government corruption, which have stirred numerous protests in Egypt. In response to his first video, the regime raided his company's offices in Cairo, arresting at least seven of his employees; following his second video, two of his cousins living in Alexandria were reported missing. Ali's father subsequently appeared on a progovernment television show denouncing his son.[28]

Coercion-by-proxy can also be used to target and control entire groups abroad, such as *students*, *labor migrants*, and ordinary *members of the diaspora*. A Chinese student in Vancouver argued, "We self-police ourselves. . . . Everybody is scared. Just this fear, I think creating the fear, it actually works."[29] In Turkish communities in Europe, ordinary members of the diaspora often live in fear of being spied on by their compatriots, who have been encouraged to do so by the Turkish regime. This creates particular challenges for dual nationals. In the Netherlands, there have been several cases of dual Turkish-Dutch nationals traveling to Turkey and having their travel documents confiscated. In one case, a recently divorced woman had traveled to Turkey with her son and had her travel documents cancelled after suspecting that her ex-husband had reported her to a tip-off hotline as revenge. One Dutch official claimed, "We're doing everything we can. . . . It's difficult, because Turkey regards them as Turkish citizens who have to abide by Turkish law."[30]

Conclusions and Policy Implications

As autocracies develop new means of exercising power over populations abroad, their use of transnational strategies of coercion-by-proxy poses a number of challenges for policymakers in democratic states, human rights actors, and international legal understandings of refuge, asylum, and protection. Existing international protection regimes operate according to state-centric assumptions, in which state sovereignty is identified with territoriality and national borders are assumed to demarcate legal jurisdictions in ways that offer refuge and asylum to persecuted individuals fleeing authoritarian states. Yet, the examples provided in this piece show that the crossing of national borders does not mean that individual dissidents and exiles—or entire groups living outside a state's territorial boundaries, such as international students, labor migrants, or ordinary diaspora members—are necessarily free from the influence of state actors in their homeland.

Some human rights reports, including that published by the U.S. Department of State, have recently added categories that directly address other examples of state-led forms of transnational repression.[31] But the use of coercion-by-proxy—in which the immediate victims of state coercion are domestic family members and acquaintances, but the ultimate targets of the actions are those who live abroad—presents a more complicated blurring of how authoritarian practices "at home" relate to diaspora politics "abroad." In a highly interconnected world, it may be necessary for human rights organizations and others to radically rethink traditional reporting mechanisms and legal remedies that focus primarily on states. One alternative to the country-based report format would be for human rights actors to think more in terms of "authoritarian practices" that transcend state borders.[32] A practice-based approach to human rights violations can shed greater light on the spatial and legal complexities that characterize contemporary human rights abuses. This includes the ways in which liberal and illiberal states, rather than operating in wholly separate spheres, are increasingly entangled.[33]

The use of coercion-by-proxy presents a more complicated blurring of how authoritarian practices "at home" relate to diaspora politics "abroad."

The Importance of Defending Diaspora Activism for Democracy and Human Rights

by Dana M. Moss

Syrians living in Istanbul protest the regime of Bashar Essad in front of Syrian Consulate in Istanbul,Turkey. Editorial credit: Sadik Gulec / Shutterstock.com

Activists in authoritarian states face steep costs in working for democracy and human rights, and for many, their only hope to survive is to escape abroad. When survivors of state violence secure refuge in democracies, they gain the opportunity to continue their activism and express their voices in new ways. Diaspora activists, in turn, play a number of important roles in the global fight for transparency, freedom, and human dignity. As this report details, these roles include spreading awareness about regime abuses, assisting dissidents working on the ground, launching protests, pursuing justice, demanding that their host-country governments pressure sending states on issues of rights and reform, and empowering diaspora communities themselves.

Yet, while diaspora activists—which I define broadly here as any émigré, exile, refugee, or emigrant advocating for social, economic, and political change in their country of origin—are relatively safe compared to those in their home countries, the operation and effects of transnational repression can curb their freedoms, and even threaten their physical safety. As the other authors in this collection elaborate, regimes are in fact widely guilty of repressing their diasporas by kidnapping and

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assassinating opponents abroad, surveilling and monitoring their activities, withdrawing student scholarships and confiscating their passports, controlling their lawful civic engagement, and punishing their family members at home. So, while diaspora activism can be impactful, all of these tactics can effectively deter, silence, and punish independent voices abroad.

This essay discusses how diaspora activism promotes democracy and human rights, the negative effects of transnational repression on their mobilizations, and the critical need for authorities to protect at-risk communities.

The Roles of Diaspora Activists in Fighting for Democracy and Human Rights

Diaspora activists perform a number of vital roles in the fight for democracy and human rights.[1] One of their major contributions is to publicize information that regimes seek to repress. Inspired by the onset of the regional uprising known as the Arab Spring, for instance, diaspora activists from countries such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria undertook a wide range of supportive roles in the uprisings.[2] These included holding teach-ins at universities, speaking to the media, and using the internet to document events on the ground.[3] This work often takes place in partnership with dissidents working in the home country, who relay information from areas off-limits to foreign journalists to their contacts in the diaspora.[4] By connecting dissidents to global media outlets directly, 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.

Another tactic used by diaspora activists to raise awareness is to protest against visiting dignitaries, such as during Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Washington, DC, and Rwandan president Paul Kagame's speech in Brussels in 2017.[5] Doing so refutes the regimes' frequent claim that autocrats have the universal support of their people. Protests draw attention to regime repression and crimes against humanity, which calls leaders' legitimacy into question. Protests also provide a counter-presence to *pro*-regime demonstrations, which are often coordinated by regimes in advance to create positive publicity and enforce loyalty. From the Libyan regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi to China under Xi Jinping, officials have been known to pay for students to provide an adoring welcome to visiting leaders.[6] Accordingly, the physical presence of critical voices on the streets brings visibility to those with rightful grievances against dictatorships.

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Diaspora activists also play an integral role in the pursuit of justice. By taking their claims to court, diaspora activists lead initiatives to prosecute torturers and war criminals. As scholar Claire Beaugrand writes, "in October 2014, a Bahraini who was granted asylum in the United Kingdom obtained a court decision stating that the son of the King of Bahrain, educated in Sandhurst and frequently traveling to the UK, did not enjoy state immunity from prosecution over a torture claim. This established that even an offense committed outside of the country can still be prosecuted in the UK."[7] Syrian refugees in Germany are likewise providing key testimony to prosecute members of the Assad regime for mass torture.[8] The ability of these dissidents and survivors to pursue justice is critical for upholding the rule of law and human rights norms. It also signals to abusers that they are not untouchable.

Diaspora activists also play a key role in demanding that host-country governments implement democratic and human rights reforms. Diaspora testimony from the Uyghur community, for instance, undergirded a widely supported resolution in the European Parliament (2019/2945[RSP]) on abuses by the Chinese regime, which

> *expressed deep concern over reports of harassment of Uyghurs abroad by the Chinese authorities in order to force them to act as informants against other Uyghurs, return to Xinjiang or remain silent about the situation there, sometimes by detaining their family members. The resolution calls on the EU to step up its efforts to protect Uyghur residents and EU citizens in member states from harassment and intimidation by the Chinese authorities.*[9]

Diaspora associations and organizations additionally address suffering in their places of origin. Syrian diaspora organizations have been working tirelessly to deliver ambulances and medicine and perform trauma surgeries

in the country's liberated zones, improve sanitation and water-delivery systems, staff and fund schools, and provide shelter and generators to refugees.[10] This is especially important because the Assad regime has hampered delivery by the International Red Crescent, preventing aid from being delivered to civilians in so-called enemy zones.[11] As regulated not-for-profit organizations, diaspora groups help to fill in this gap, both by channeling donations to emergency responders and working directly on the ground to assist survivors. Diaspora remittances therefore can provide literal lifelines for people suffering in their homelands and in refugee camps.

Diaspora organizations, in turn, empower the diaspora itself.

Diaspora organizations, in turn, empower the diaspora itself. The Syrian American Council, for instance, trains its members in how to lobby their elected representatives and encourages Syrian Americans to register to vote. A Saudi organization called ALQST, founded by regime defector Yahya Assiri, conducts seminars aimed at educating fellow Saudis about their human rights. Their websites also provide the confidential means for Saudis residing anywhere in the world to report regime abuses and receive help. Diaspora activists from places like Eritrea also run their own media campaigns on cable television or social media.[12] It comes as no surprise that diaspora organizations can facilitate the engagement of their members with democratic norms, endowing "immigrants with a renewed sense of efficacy and self-worth that facilitates their integration into the political institutions of their new country," as migration scholars Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Alejandro Portes, and William Haller argue.[13]

The Effects of Transnational Repression on Diaspora Activism

Despite the seeming prevalence of diaspora activism, however, my and others' research demonstrates that transnational repression simultaneously erects a barrier to engaging lawful activism.[14] As discussed above by other authors in this collection, tactics used by foreign governments to repress their critics abroad—including assassinations, the proxy punishment of family members, surveillance on- and offline, death and rape threats, and slander, among other means[15]—cast a long shadow over diaspora communities. While some are willing to risk or endure these costs, activists also report that many of their co-nationals are too fearful to risk retribution.

Identifying exactly what percentage of a given diaspora is effectively cowed into silence is a major challenge. Transnational repression can pressure diaspora members into appearing "as if" they are loyal to regimes, to borrow Professor Lisa Wedeen's phrasing.[16] As a 2020 Amnesty International report details, "Uyghurs living in [the] diaspora overseas have generally been very reluctant to talk about their detained or missing relatives in Xinjiang, fearing possible retaliation against either themselves or other relatives in Xinjiang. About two-thirds of those who spoke to Amnesty International requested anonymity, citing fear of reprisals from the authorities." Accordingly, fear of reporting one's true opinions—even to outside researchers touting anonymous surveys—can prevent diaspora members from revealing critical and nuanced views.

When fears of transnational repression are widely pervasive, activists report that their co-nationals become reluctant to join organizations promoting progressive change. After the initial founding of the Syrian American Council in 2005, for example, activists reported that recruiting Syrian Americans into the organization was virtually impossible. As a California-based organizer said in an interview,

> *I tried contacting a few people to encourage them to be part of it. Not a single person that I know who I contacted agreed to. . . . Every time they talked to people, people didn't want to do it because they understood . . . the consequence would've been very severe if you were visiting Syria or [the Syrian Intelligence] might visit your family members in Syria.*[17]

Transnational repression also perpetuates mistrust between diaspora members because individuals worry about being subjected to surveillance. Mounting evidence demonstrates that individuals from China have indeed been coerced into spying on their co-nationals.[18] As Amnesty International reports, "Not knowing who among them might be reporting back to Chinese security agents plants seeds of suspicion and mistrust that take root and further feed the sense of isolation and fear."[19] This curbs the practice of free assembly and association, and the circulation of ideas between diaspora

members, severely inhibiting their potential to act as a collective force for democracy and human rights.

It is no wonder that diaspora members report engaging in self-censorship.[20] Tragically, this can lead victims of transnational repression to purposefully avoid alerting local law enforcement about threats to their personal safety. One such Syrian living in Sweden told the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* that "she knows of 17 other people who have received threats. All of them suspect that the Syrian regime is behind them but few have dared to report the incidents to the Swedish authorities."[21] Transnational repression also impacts the ability of diaspora members to engage in independent journalism. One Toronto-based journalist for a Chinese-language newspaper, for instance, reported that her parents in China were harassed for her work, and that "I don't feel there is free speech here. I can't report freely."[22]

Regime threats also curb the ability of foreign universities to serve as places of free thought and independent learning. In Australia, Chinese-born lecturers and students have suffered repercussions because of comments they made in classrooms, and in the United States, a graduating senior named Yang Shuping was harassed for praising the University of Maryland in College Park for teaching her about "free speech."[23] As a *Foreign Policy* report recently revealed, staff at the Chinese embassy in Washington, DC, praised a group of students from the local regime-approved student group for censuring Shuping.[24] All of the students who spoke to Foreign Policy about state interference on university campuses requested anonymity out of concern for themselves and their families.

Lastly, transnational repression makes attending even the most banal public demonstration a potentially high-risk activity. In Washington, DC, Kurdish protesters and local police were violently attacked by Erdoğan's Turkish bodyguards during the president's visit in May 2017. Some demonstrators require police protection just to hold silent vigils. In one of many cases, Abdurehim Gheni, a well-known Uyghur activist in the Netherlands, has been physically harassed and received death threats from persons suspected of working with the Chinese intelligence services.[25]

Threats against the exercise of basic rights and freedoms not only harm individuals but effectively force the majority of a diaspora into silence. This places the burden of diaspora activism on the shoulders of an exiled minority. It also limits activism by making their organizations less representative of the diverse opinions present within a diaspora community. So, while diaspora activism has the potential to flourish in democracies, transnational repression can suppress the ability for an anti-regime community to work as a force for change.

Transnational repression also perpetuates mistrust between diaspora members because individuals worry about being subjected to surveillance.

The Need for Protection

Taken together, diaspora activism plays a critically important role in promoting democracy and human rights. However, transnational repression not only threatens diaspora members' legal rights and civil liberties but also the rule of law, state sovereignty, and international human rights norms. It is therefore vital for host-country governments to recognize the elevated threats and risks associated with diaspora activism so that they can proactively support and protect these communities. Local and national enforcement agencies need to be made aware of the potential threats against diaspora organizations and activists, and communicate with community leaders about how to lodge complaints. Governments must also provide the fullest possible protections to diaspora activists and their organizations through legislation, which is needed to sanction regimes for atrocities and protect diaspora communities from threats and interference. Universities, which often depend financially on international students, must be vigilant in ensuring that student groups follow the law and that students at risk for harassment are protected. Because diaspora activists are essential actors in the global struggle for democracy and human rights, protecting their civil liberties remains a central responsibility of authorities today and in the future.

Threats against the exercise of basic rights and freedoms not only harm individuals but effectively force the majority of a diaspora into silence.

The Internationalization of Universities and the Repression of Academic Freedom

by Saipira Furstenberg, Tena Prelec, and John Heathershaw

Students gather to call for academic freedom at Hong Kong University as fears grow that Beijing is interfering in the city's education. Editorial credit: PHILIPPE LOPEZ/AFP via Getty Images

Academic freedom[1] is at the heart of university life. It forms the fundamental basis for disseminating knowledge and fostering independent thinking of students and staff members; it also allows for self-governance and academic job security to ensure independence.[2] Yet, a recent report[3] by the University and College Union (UCU) in the United Kingdom (UK) highlights that the major elements of academic freedom (freedom for teaching and research, autonomy, shared governance, and employment protection) are in decline. In certain countries, scholars and students are frequently persecuted, arrested, or tortured for their academic work, research, and publications; in others, the threats to academic freedom are more subtle, often driven by market dynamics and the increase of a corporate governance model of the university.

The phenomenon of the "internationalization" of universities—the increasing quantity and quality of international partnerships and transnational ties in research, education, and associated activities—is a broadly positive force. But these partnerships often link places where academics suffer direct and severe threats to places where

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universities are increasingly reliant on income from foreign sources. According to Scholars at Risk (SAR), there has been an increase of academic persecution around the world: between September 2018 and August 2019, there were 324 attacks on higher-education communities in 56 countries.[4] In parallel, an erosion of universities' financial and institutional autonomy has been recorded in top liberal democracies.[5] The need for funding has forced many major universities to collaborate with governments in authoritarian states, whose policies delimit the space for freedom of expression and thinking by controlling what is taught, researched, and discussed at university campuses.[6]

The internationalization of the university presents an opportunity for authoritarian states to assert their influence across borders. *Authoritarian influencing*[7] in universities constitutes an attempt to shape their research and teaching agendas and thus threatens the academic integrity of the institution. *Transnational repression* in this context occurs when individuals—typically but not exclusively students or faculty from an authoritarian state—are subject to repressive measures against their academic freedom and wider human rights. Drawing on a survey of UK-based Area Studies academics,[8] this paper aims to shed light on how both of these processes can and do take place in UK universities as a result of international collaboration with authoritarian governments. We explore four areas of internationalization that are vulnerable to authoritarian influencing and/or transnational repression: international partnerships and funding; expatriate students and faculty; fieldwork; and overseas campuses. Our findings suggest a fraught environment where authoritarian influencing and transnational repression combine with market dynamics and national security responses to curtail academic freedom.

International partnerships and funding

Concern regarding internationalization and academic freedom involves pressure from foreign governments, upon whose funding UK universities may depend via overseas students or research partnerships. In recent years, the gradual withdrawal of core state funding in higher education has driven UK universities to compete in the global market for donations and international students' fees. Since 2010, research funding in the UK has fallen by 12.8 percent.[9] At the same time, funding from foreign sources has increased in importance. A significant share of this funding originates from authoritarian states.

The UK's leading universities have accepted sponsorship from authoritarian regimes accused of human rights violations and links to terrorism, with hundreds of millions of pounds funneled into British higher-education institutions to establish research centers and other kinds of partnerships.[10] Such actions, which may first occur as benign, might have an outward-facing political agenda to gain international respectability. More importantly, they represent new mechanisms for authoritarian regimes to influence the structures of research and be recognized, informally and internationally, as legitimate.

The universities that are most vulnerable to such mechanisms are those relying most heavily on foreign income sources. In 2011, the London School of Economics (LSE) infamously accepted a £1.5 million donation[11] from a charity run by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad al-Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah—one of the most conservative emirates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—has given more than £8 million to the University of Exeter over the course of twenty years.[12] In 2012, the University of Cambridge received a £3.7 million donation to establish a professorship for Chinese development studies, funded by a charity controlled by China's former prime minister Wen Jiabao.[13]

> The internationalization of the university presents an opportunity for authoritarian states to assert their influence across borders.

Such one-off donations, often for capital projects, garner headlines. However, a less visible but more prevalent form of authoritarian influencing occurs through state scholarship programs for study and faculty visits. These are important to universities as they support students paying fees at the lucrative international fee level. At present, UK universities host more than 100,000 Chinese students, which represent an important part of universities' revenue streams.[14] Chinese authorities, for instance, have threatened to withhold Chinese students from the University of Oxford in an unsuccessful bid to force the school's chancellor, Chris Patten, to cancel a visit to Hong Kong.[15]

The risks associated with this double financial dependence are multiple. As summarized by one of our survey respondents, "these partnerships have financial implications; as a result, there is an incentive to keep them in place, especially where institutions struggle with other sources of funding." Another respondent remarked that worries about the loss of income from fees paid by foreign students push universities to "turn a blind eye" towards the behavior of authoritarian regimes, while also encouraging staff members to avoid sensitive topics—which occurs either overtly (that is, being told to avoid certain themes) or through more subtle "hints" that result in self-censorship. While there are few examples of overt censorship, the evidence that self-censorship is increasingly widespread indicates that academic freedom is at risk. Without a transparent system of recording donations and allowing university faculty and students to hold the institution to account, the integrity of the university can be called into question.

Expatriate students and faculty

The students and faculty on state scholarship programs, such as Kazakhstan's Bolashak program, are routinely subject to surveillance by their home government security services and often exercise self-censorship accordingly.[16] Unless academic freedom is explicitly protected in these arrangements, collaborations with authoritarian regimes end up curtailing the freedom of academic staff and students to express their views on politically and socially sensitive topics, as well as their freedom to teach and conduct research on topics that are thought to be at odds with the donors' visions. Violations often result in self-censorship, suspensions, or even, in rare cases, the loss of jobs.

Sponsorships by foreign regimes create obligations that may encourage UK-based academics to steer their research agenda to avoid controversies with their donors. For example, a report published by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee[17] found that Chinese embassies put pressure on faculty members to remove critics of the Beijing government from academic events or to limit speech on politically sensitive topics such as the Hong Kong protests.[18] In other instances, scholars and foreign students suffer from restrictions in the production of academic conduct and content, with sometimes vicious retaliations. There have been cases of students experiencing surveillance, intimidation, and coercive pressure on relatives back home, or even legal action taken by authorities to persecute academics and critics of the government's policies.[19] In 2016, Turkey launched criminal prosecutions against academics, including foreign scholars based at UK institutions, who signed a petition called "Academics for Peace" criticizing[20] the military crackdown on Kurdish rebels in southeastern Turkey. One of our respondents recounted their experience after signing this petition: "Along with 1,128 academics, we were accused of supporting terrorism and put on trial. . . . My [UK] department was afraid about losing their Turkish partnerships after the criminalization of peace activism in Turkey. I have been asked not to write on the Kurdish question for a while."

> A less visible but more prevalent form of authoritarian influencing occurs through state scholarship programs for study and faculty visits.

Our exploratory survey suggests that these forms of direct threats to foreign faculty and students are far more widespread than has been reported. The spectrum of countries mentioned by respondents also goes beyond what we would normally think of fully fledged authoritarian states. It includes "very strong pressure placed on UK institutions by Israeli embassies and proxies"; cases of Russian co-authors pulling out of conference presentations "out of fears of repercussion from [their] home university"; Saudi Arabian students asked "to report to their embassy once a month"; and China's surveillance of student societies, which "influences students' choices of dissertation topics away from controversial ones." This attitude of Chinese students is, no doubt, influenced by real threats, such as the interference of the Chinese embassy in the UK (which "instructed some Chinese students in response to criticism of the Chinese government treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang") and even by that of the secret services (for example, a China-based PhD student warned that there would be "government spies in the audience to monitor what he was saying" at a conference in the UK).

However, more common is an indirect threat to academic freedom in the form of self-censorship. One academic stated that he has "observed self-censorship among state-funded Turkish students . . . who avoided making critical comments about their country's politics in front of their Turkish peers and were worried about their MA dissertations being read by

their funding institution or others in their country of origin." Students from China, too, were said to be "clearly worried that they would be reported on by other Chinese students." Sometimes, these faculty would themselves indicate the need to tone down criticism of what is taught in the classroom, as per this testimony: "I have censored in classes with Chinese students as I have received difficult pressure from them not to assign anything critical of China."

Fieldwork

Restrictions on academic freedom are also found in the practice of research and data collection. This may take the form of depriving academic critics of their personal liberty and individual freedoms or banning those scholarly activities that are not aligned with the regime's vision. Scholars have been attacked, killed, detained, or prosecuted conducting fieldwork. In May 2018, Matthew Hedges, a British doctoral student from Durham University, who was in the UAE for a two-week research trip, was arrested at Dubai International Airport on suspicion of spying on behalf of the British government.[21] In November, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Hedges was later granted clemency and released. In a similar vein, in August 2019, Iranian authorities detained Kameel Ahmady, a dual Iranian-British citizen and anthropologist who researched female genital mutilation and child marriage, in apparent retaliation for his scholarly work.[22] These cases closely mirror the killing of the Italian Cambridge University doctoral student Giulio Regeni, who had traveled to Cairo in 2016 to do research on Egyptian trade unions—a politically sensitive subject in the country. His body was discovered in a ditch on February 3, 2016, with signs of torture.[23] Egyptian security forces are suspected of being responsible for his disappearance and murder.

Many other cases of restriction of liberties or even temporary detention go unreported due to fear of professional and personal repercussions, and one such case was reported to us confidentially in our survey. Another respondent spoke of "numerous instances when international PhD students were called by phone (or even summoned) by the police of their country, and asked to stop asking questions on a certain topic." Such forms of direct but low-level interference are not the sole purview of authoritarian states but can be found in the security responses of the UK authorities. One noted that "British intelligence, specifically MI5, asked me to secretly debrief students returning from China about their Chinese contacts," while others mentioned "Home Office pressure regarding activism—perhaps not explicit pressure but investigation into [our] activities." However, it is encouraging that none of our respondents reported any pressure by UK universities in their fieldwork abroad beyond that of meeting the standard university ethics procedures.

Much more commonplace than these high-profile cases is the fact that a large part of the world remains a politically unfree environment for academic research, a phenomenon increasingly discussed in the academic literature on fieldwork in practice.[24] Scholars working on sensitive topics are often forced to limit the scope of their investigations due to the difficulty of obtaining visas or the risk of endangering their fieldwork contacts. While conducting fieldwork, foreign academics work with local research assistants, translators, and other academic partners. However, some governments' formal and informal restrictions may make this dangerous or impossible. Local scholars are often subject to state surveillance and pressure from authorities.[25]

Many other cases of restriction of liberties or even temporary detention go unreported due to fear of professional and personal repercussions.

UK-based scholars whose passports offer them a degree of protection are also routinely subject to such measures. One of our survey respondents reported conducting fieldwork in both Western Sahara (a disputed territory between the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and neighboring Morocco) and Morocco. While the pushback in Western Sahara—an unrecognized state—was more overt (through "visible following and surveillance, threatening anonymous calls, theft of mp3 player from luggage"), the coercion was more subtle and difficult to prove in Morocco proper (including "likely social media surveillance, non-responsiveness of formerly consolidated contacts which suggests some form of blacklisting"). As a result of such actions, international partnerships are often curtailed or reshaped due to fears of government retaliation.

Overseas campuses

The internationalization and commercialization of universities has increased the outsourcing of higher education abroad. A positive trend in itself, the opening of campuses overseas has raised a number of controversies due to the choice of host countries, which have oftentimes coincided with states oppressing civil liberties and human rights. According to data compiled by the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT),[26] as of 2017, most UK overseas campuses are based in China (9), in Malaysia (6), and in Middle Eastern countries (11). The establishment of these branches is, in the majority of cases, financially subsidized by the foreign government. Yet, sometimes this support comes with restrictions on subjects to be taught or researched.

In most cases, the university selects a range of topics to be taught that are not controversial, posing no challenge to the domestic political or social order. As noted by John Nagle, Reader in Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, who spent four months as a visiting professor at the UAE's national university: "Rather than encouraging critical thinking, education in the UAE rests on a technocratic logic. Education is supposed to help its society resolve tricky social problems and maintain the status quo."[27] In 2018, the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, the first joint-venture university in China, removed a foreign academic from its management board for being critical of Communist Party–backed initiatives.[28]

These examples demonstrate that the outsourcing of higher education to campuses in authoritarian states is typically accompanied by a relaxation of standards of academic freedom compared to the home university. In the words of one of our survey respondents:

> *Too often partnerships between UK higher institutions and overseas partners involve institutions with strong ties to authoritarian governments and contribute to providing them with international legitimacy. If this ends up limiting the kind of topics or perspectives that can be discussed in collaborative research and teaching, or if it influences the appointment or treatment of staff, then of course this is very problematic. There must be alternative ways to support internationalisation and academic collaboration that do not make us complicit with repressive regimes.*

Conclusion

As the observations above demonstrate, the internationalization of higher education has enabled authoritarian states to effectively "transnationalize" everyday forms of censorship and political repression to students and faculty both at home and abroad. Many of these forms of influence appear to be indirect, in that they derive from fear of direct measures against oneself or one's family. These include fear of the loss of the right to travel, of the right to host students, or of the likelihood of receiving donations. Evidence remains scattered, and further research on this under-studied topic is ongoing by the authors.

However, what is clear is the value for an authoritarian regime to exercise direct and indirect influence outside its national territories. The stability of the regime remains the first concern of autocrats. Academic freedom, and therefore the possibility of intellectual dissent, represent challenges to the authoritarian structure. Hence, ideas and movements that might compromise the regime, within the nation state as well as abroad, are subject to repression. According to such logic, the state must constantly reaffirm its dominant position by penetrating spaces of critical thinking within and beyond its territorial borders.

The risk to academic freedom, however, is not solely from such states. As remarked by several of our UK respondents, risks "emanate mostly from within, rather than from without". They are created and enhanced by market mechanisms that generate unregulated competition between universities over the funding they offer. Furthermore, the foreign policy establishments of some governments have come to identify certain research as a security threat and have begun to impose limits on international partnerships.[29] Neither market forces nor a security-based approach is likely to help protect academic freedom from transnational repression and authoritarian influencing; more likely, they will make matters worse.

What can be more effective is the establishment of a code of conduct – on foreign donations and campuses, on protecting expatriate students and faculty, and on training and support for fieldworkers – to protect academic freedom in the context of internationalization. Ultimately, adoption of these common standards and measures must be transparent, allowing for a relationship of accountability between university leaders and their students and staff.

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The Internationalization of Universities and the Repression of Academic Freedom

1 The UK University and College Union's statement on academic freedom outlines five rights: freedom in teaching and discussion; freedom in carrying out research without commercial or political interference; freedom to disseminate and publish one's research findings; freedom from institutional censorship, including the right to express one's opinion publicly about the institution or the education system in which one works; and, freedom to participate in professional and representative academic bodies, including trade unions.

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Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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