

The long arm of the authoritarian state The reach of authoritarian repression is growing. Now, not even exile is safe.

By Mike Abramowitz and Nate Schenkkan February 3, 2021

In October 2019, Iran kidnapped journalist [Ruhollah Zam](#) in Iraq. Zam had lived as a recognized refugee in France, but after traveling to Iraq for unknown reasons, the Revolutionary Guard Corps abducted and then smuggled him across the border to Iran. After a hasty trial last summer, he was executed in December for “corruption on earth.”

Last July, Mamikhan Umarov, a Chechen exile who had criticized the regime of leader Ramzan Kadyrov, was shot and killed in a Vienna suburb — the [third](#) Chechen killed in apparent assassinations in Europe in a year.

Mike Abramowitz is president of Freedom House. Nate Schenkkan is the organization’s director of research strategy and the co-author of the report [“Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach.”](#)

Illustrations by Edel Rodriguez for The Washington Post

In August, the Rwandan government abducted [Paul Rusesabagina](#), the real-life hero of the Oscar-winning film “[Hotel Rwanda](#),” while he was traveling through the [United Arab Emirates](#). After being held at least three days incommunicado, he was charged with supporting terrorism and is [awaiting trial](#).

Experts who follow Iran, Russia or Rwanda will recognize these cases. China’s relentless persecution of [Uighurs and Tibetans](#) beyond its borders is the subject of magazine articles and human rights reports. And most

informed people know about Saudi Arabia's murder in Istanbul of Post contributing columnist [Jamal Khashoggi](#).

These incidents are part of a growing pattern of "[transnational repression](#)," or coercion perpetrated overseas by authoritarian governments against citizens of their own countries. People fleeing repression at home, who might have once expected to live relatively free of harassment in foreign countries, have discovered that sanctuary is hard to find. Through physical threats, spyware and violence, states are taking steps to intimidate exiles and prevent them from exercising their rights, even in democratic countries.

Today, cross-border coercion is on the verge of becoming normal. In January, [Ukraine](#) arrested and sent two Turkish citizens home without proper deportation proceedings, the latest in dozens of extraordinary renditions of Turkish citizens since the [coup attempt](#) of 2016.

In a new report, "[Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach](#)," Freedom House compiled and catalogued 608 incidents of such direct cross-border authoritarian attacks since 2014 — detentions, assaults, physical intimidation, unlawful deportations, renditions and suspected assassinations. The incidents in the catalogue are only the tip of the iceberg; every assassination, every rendition, every detention creates a ripple effect in a diaspora community, silencing far more than just the individual targeted. And beyond these cases are more widespread tactics of "everyday" transnational repression: digital threats, spyware and coercion by proxy, such as the imprisonment of exiles' families.

assassinated

or suffered assassination attempts, since 2014.

Host countries from where exiles were kidnapped or deported — without due process

or with violations of due process — to an origin country where they would likely face persecution.

Source: Freedom House's "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of

Transnational Repression."

These acts of violence and intimidation shape the lives of exiles. People with whom Freedom House spoke for our report described intense feelings of depression and exhaustion. Although some activists remain resilient, even defiant, many others drop out of activism or shy away from speaking publicly. "They kill you even if they don't kill your body," said one Rwandan exile. "They kill your spirit."

Stopping cross-national harassment is not only a moral imperative; it is also a matter of self-interest for the United States and its own citizens. Modern authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia do not sit passively behind iron curtains — they are intertwined with democracies through economic exchange, travel and a dense web of daily person-to-person contacts.

Alongside these ties, they in turn are trying to extend authoritarian controls once limited to life inside their borders to life inside democracies. And if we can't or won't protect the rights of exiles and diasporas who have sought the protection of free societies, what does that say about our willingness to protect our own citizens?

Why it's growing

Transnational repression is not a new phenomenon — think of [Leon Trotsky's murder](#) by a suspected agent of Joseph Stalin in Mexico in 1940 — but its reach is growing significantly. Authoritarians demand loyalty not just to the state but also to the leader or the party. But without being able to generate legitimacy through consent, these leaders lean on coercion — and use it against those who go abroad.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi's international pursuit of "[stray dogs](#)," as he referred to his opponents, spread terror throughout Libya's exile community. Iran conducted a wave of high-profile exile assassinations in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s after political leaders and opposition groups fled the country after the revolution. Rwandan President [Paul Kagame](#) has faced allegations of extraterritorial assassinations and kidnappings since the aftermath of the [1994 genocide](#), when the new regime turned on its opponents first at home and then after they fled abroad.

[\[Sign up for the Press Freedom Partnership newsletter for curated view of the latest issues affecting press freedom worldwide\]](#)

The deadly trend began to accelerate in 2006 with the death of [Alexander Litvinenko](#), the Russian defector poisoned in England. Russian agents flew to London with a rare [radioactive isotope](#) that they dropped in his tea, in revenge for his cooperation with Western intelligence agencies. The slow and ineffectual British response to Litvinenko's assassination presaged an uninterrupted pattern of brazen Russian attacks in Europe, including the nerve-agent poisoning of [Sergei Skripal](#) in Britain in 2018 and the shooting of [Zelimkhan Khangoshvili](#) in a Berlin park in 2019.

Assassinations and renditions are the cases that grab headlines. But behind these high-profile events is a deeper trend amplified by technology, hostility to migration in democracies and a weakening commitment to stopping attacks.

The first factor is technology. Digital telecommunications have enlarged regimes' perceptions of the threat that exiles pose. [Ruhollah Zam](#) operated a popular Telegram channel for Iranians called Amadnews — even though he lived in France, he was able to participate in his country's civic life from afar, almost in real time. Like other vocal Chechen exiles, [Mamikhhan Umarov](#) broadcast on a YouTube channel, where he would excoriate the brutal leadership of Kadyrov.

As exiles' audiences have grown, so has regimes' capacity to silence their voices. The very digital technologies that enable activists to reach millions back home also present opportunities to states to disrupt and surveil exiles' networks from thousands of miles away. The decreasing costs of these tools, and their availability both as software and as services sold in a largely unregulated international marketplace, means that any government willing to pay can acquire them.

The very digital technologies that enable activists to reach millions back home also present opportunities to states to disrupt and surveil exiles' networks from thousands of miles away.

The NSO Group's [Pegasus](#) software — which Saudi Arabia has used to hack exiles' phones, including those of friends of [Khashoggi](#) — is the most well-known, but it is not unique. In its research, Freedom House found that 17 countries that conduct physical campaigns also use spyware against their nationals abroad, including obvious ones such as China, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also Ethiopia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Uzbekistan and Egypt.

China has unique capabilities in this regard through the WeChat platform, a one-stop app that combines social media, messaging, bill-paying, shopping, travel, food delivery and more. WeChat is ubiquitous not only within China, but also in the huge diasporas originating from the country. Its universal usage, promoted by China's [Great Firewall](#) and bans on other competitors, makes it unavoidable for people who live abroad and want to stay in touch with family in China. Controlling the software from production to distribution to its daily use allows China to limit speech and organizing

through censorship, to make threats without fear of any constraint by non-Chinese social media platforms, and to collect and organize data on users for political purposes with impunity.

Even on other social media platforms, digital intimidation and smear campaigns against exiles are relatively simple. Particularly when combined with threats or actual violence against family members still in the origin country, [these tools](#) can force exiles to lower their profiles, sever their networks or withdraw from activism altogether. Kadyrov put it succinctly in remarks on [state television](#) that he directed at the Chechen diaspora in 2016: "This modern age and technology allow us to know everything, and we can find any of you."

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

Looming over the issue are the U.S. government's secret kidnappings and targeted killings as part of the [global war on terrorism](#) that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. All over the world, states apply the label of "terrorist" to exiles whom they pursue, often citing the examples of the United States or Israel, which also engages in targeted killings outside its territory. In 58 percent of the cases Freedom House catalogued, the origin state accused the targeted individual of terrorism. Our count found 90 renditions and nine assassinations or assassination attempts against individuals accused of terrorism by 10 different origin countries since 2014.

The war on terrorism has embedded in the global lexicon a flexible

vocabulary that many states use to place certain people beyond the protections of law. Muslims are especially vulnerable: Seventy-eight percent of the cases Freedom House identified appear to have involved people of Muslim origin, reflecting the high proportion of Muslim-majority states engaged in these campaigns, the persecution of Muslim minorities in countries such as China, and the vulnerability of Muslims in migration at a time of global fears about Islamist terrorism.

What it means and what to do

The result is that cross-border attacks on exiles are in danger of becoming something governments seem ready to accept in the behavior of both allies and rivals.

After the targeted killing of Khashoggi, the U.S. government under President Donald Trump swept the problem under the rug over congressional objections, and even increased arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The United Nations' Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has called [Turkey's campaign](#) "a systematic practice of State-sponsored extraterritorial abductions and forced returns," but the issue is scarcely raised among Turkey's allies in NATO. The Kremlin conducts flagrant assassinations in Europe, and maybe in the United States. The "Hotel Rwanda" hero [Rusesabagina](#) was living in the United States at the time of his kidnapping, but the State Department has barely raised his case, and Kagame remains a member in good standing of the international community. Dealing with the issue starts by dealing with impunity: breaking leaders' assumption that they can literally get away with murder. That means consistent, targeted sanctions and sustained bilateral consequences for states that kill, kidnap, threaten and assault exiles.

E/R



Solutions will also require that democracies look within themselves. That means democratic governments restoring the fundamental right to seek asylum; conducting sustained outreach to vulnerable communities without making them targets for increased surveillance.

Solutions will also require that democracies look within themselves. That means democratic governments restoring the fundamental right to seek asylum; conducting sustained outreach to vulnerable communities without making them targets for increased surveillance; using diplomatic and financial pressure to reform Interpol so it can no longer be abused; and shutting down commercial spyware exports that facilitate repression. These steps can strengthen protections for exiles and make it harder for states to reach their nationals abroad.

Transnational repression is a problem that illustrates how, now more than ever, “over there” is in fact “right here.” In a 2018 speech, [Joe Biden](#) accurately linked the global rise of authoritarianism with the turn to xenophobia and illiberalism inside democracies. President Biden’s administration has already taken laudable steps to move away from the hyperaggressive immigration and border policies of the Trump era, which should reduce opportunities for other states to exploit the U.S. immigration system against exiles. The administration has also frozen the previous administration’s questionable arms sales to [Saudi Arabia](#), and the new director of national intelligence, [Avril Haines](#), has pledged to submit the intelligence community’s report on Khashoggi’s killing to Congress. These are not yet a strategy to counter transnational repression, but they are signs pointing in the right direction.

Building resilience against transnational forms of coercion should be part of an overall strategy to repel the global tide of authoritarianism. It would affirm our democracy from within, strengthen our ability to resist the influence of dictators and model the opportunity for democratic change in the world.

Read more:

[Masih Alinejad: Iranian officials have declared they want to kidnap me. It’s happened to others before.](#)

[Tenzin Dorjee: The WeChat ban is a difficult but necessary step toward openness in China](#)

[The Post's View: New revelations depict a Russian-sponsored assassination on German soil](#)

[Jeffrey Smith: Rwanda just kidnapped its most famous activist. Will anyone speak out against the regime?](#)

[Manal al-Sharif: The Saudi diaspora of dissidents in exile is fighting back](#)