

Transnational Repression: Trends and Policy Approaches

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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Congressman McGovern, Congressman Smith, and members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Freedom House greatly appreciates your leadership on this important issue.

Transnational repression is a set of physical and digital tactics used by governments to reach across borders to silence dissent from members of their diasporas and exiled activists. It threatens the rights of targeted individuals and communities, the functioning of democratic institutions, and national security.

Since Freedom House presented in front of this Commission in February of last year, we have added another 160 physical incidents of transnational repression to our database. That database, which spans a decade from 2014 to 2024, now contains 1,219 incidents across 103 countries. I'll note that because it relies on publicly reported and confirmed physical cases, the database represents only the tip of the iceberg of global transnational repression.

I want to describe three striking findings from our data. First, the desire among governments to silence dissent beyond their borders through violence and intimidation is unfortunately widespread: 48 governments, nearly a quarter of the world's states, have used tactics of transnational repression in the last ten years. At least 19 have used spyware against targets in exile. Second, although the governments of Russia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Tajikistan, Rwanda and Cambodia are aggressively pursuing dissidents abroad, the Chinese government remains the most prolific perpetrator of transnational repression, undertaking the world's most sophisticated and comprehensive campaign. Third, transnational repression is made possible by cooperation between states: in two thirds of the incidents we have recorded, authorities in countries where dissidents have resettled have collaborated with perpetrator states to facilitate transnational repression through Interpol Notices, extradition, and unlawful deportation.

In addition to tracking trends and incidents, Freedom House has also been examining the policy responses of host countries. We recently published a report on Canada.

In Canada, growing attention over the last three years to the problem of transnational repression has been motivated by two factors. The first are fears around foreign election interference. Both civil society researchers and government monitoring bodies have noted that the government of China has targeted Canadian politicians critical of Beijing during national elections with smear campaigns and threats against their extended families. Although there has not been any definitive

proof that these efforts impacted election outcomes, the Canadian government has undertaken changes in policy and practice that are intended to protect the country's political institutions. Second, many Canadians were shocked by the announcement in the fall of 2023 that the Canadian government believed that agents of the Indian government were credibly linked to the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Sikh activist and naturalized Canadian citizen.

Concerns about foreign election interference and extraterritorial violence spurred public demand for responses and resulted in a number of government reports, a public inquiry, and changes to legislation—including the adoption of criminal penalties for harassment, intimidation and other acts done on behalf of a foreign entity. The Canadian government also provided significant leadership in shepherding a leaders' statement on transnational repression at the recent G7 Summit.

I would be happy to answer questions about any of these responses, but I want to conclude my testimony by highlighting one strategy of the Canadian government that we at Freedom House think is especially helpful for addressing transnational repression: direct community engagement.

In early 2025, agencies of the Canadian government including Public Safety Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Department of Justice, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service began holding community meetings with diasporas across Canadian cities. These meetings provide information about newly adopted legislation as well as tactics of and ways to report transnational repression. Importantly, they include police from local jurisdictions. Meetings like these help mitigate the threat posed by foreign governments by bringing diasporas closer to the agencies and institutions of their host governments, including police forces. Ultimately, these are the kinds of connections that help to build resilience among targeted communities.

Autocrats around the world are hoping that democratic governments will not protect exiles and diasporas in their exercise of fundamental freedoms. We must prove them wrong. Alongside community engagement of the type that the Canadian government is doing, Freedom House also recommends that governments:

1. Adopt an official government-wide definition of transnational repression that can be used across departments and agencies and in communications.
2. Provide training to federal, state, and local law enforcement on tactics of transnational repression.
3. Raise transnational repression as a priority issue with partner governments and at international fora, while also pursuing accountability for perpetrator governments through sanctions, visa restrictions, and export controls over technology used for transnational repression, such as commercial spyware.

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