

**Testimony of
Scott Busby
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Hearing on
“Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief”
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Chair Turkel, Vice Chair Cooper, distinguished Members of the Commission; thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The term “transnational repression” is relatively new, but the threat is not. Authoritarian regimes regularly seek to silence dissent to their regimes from beyond their borders. In-person and online, they physically intimidate and threaten those who have sought refuge from their regimes – some of whom have citizenship in their countries of refuge -- to prevent them from exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief. They also put pressure on those speaking out by harassing or threatening their family members.

It should come as little surprise to the Commission and to the audience tuning in that some of the countries with the most troubling trendline on transnational repression also happen to be among the worst violators of the freedom of religion or belief. On November 30, 2022, Secretary Blinken designated 12 countries, including Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the People’s Republic of China as Countries of Particular Concern for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Governments in these countries increasingly seek to silence, intimidate, and threaten members of religious communities, spiritual practitioners, and outspoken religious freedom advocates, both within and outside their borders.

As your recent Annual Report noted, the countries that carry out transnational repression often don’t act alone. They pressure and coerce

foreign governments to aid in their repression. This includes the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which pressures foreign governments to return ("refouled") members of ethnic and religious minority groups. If forced to return, many of these individuals will likely be subjected to torture, arbitrary detention, and other human rights abuses.

In response to these actions, the U.S. government is executing a multi-faceted strategy to counter, deter, and mitigate their prevalence and impact. The strategy revolves around four prongs:

- 1) **Coordination** - This pervasive issue requires a whole-of-government response, and we support the important work of our partners within the interagency who are actively working to stop this kind of repression here at home. The Administration has spearheaded a sustained interagency effort to encourage information-sharing within the U.S. government on countering transnational repression; to develop public-facing materials to raise awareness; to share threat information with partners, conduct outreach and offer resources to victims; and to deploy accountability tools. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's recent arrests of individuals suspected of operating an "overseas police service station" on behalf of the PRC in Manhattan cited information from the Department's 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom in its indictment, and one defendant admitted to participating in PRC government-organized counterprotests against Falun Gong. As articulated in the National Security Strategy, the U.S. government also engages our allies and partners to share best practices and mount coordinated multilateral responses.
- 2) **Education** - Since 2021, the Department of State has included reporting on transnational repression in the annual Human Rights Report to make public the trends and incidents we are tracking. We proactively engage the full spectrum of stakeholders impacted by transnational repression, including most importantly, the targeted communities themselves, including religious and spiritual practitioners and advocates for religious freedom; civil society representatives; like-minded and affected

governments; and the business and investor community. Within our agencies and departments, we train officers to understand what transnational repression is and how to identify it. We also train local law enforcement to ensure they understand what transnational repression is and how to respond to it.

- 3) **Accountability & Deterrence** - We consider all available tools, in coordination with our interagency partners, to promote accountability for acts of transnational repression. These include visa restrictions, economic and financial sanctions, investment restrictions by the Treasury Department, export controls by the Commerce Department on technology that could be misused to help facilitate transnational repression, and, of course, law enforcement actions in the United States to investigate and prosecute perpetrators.

Last year, for instance, the Department of State took action to promote accountability for the PRC's transnational repression. The Secretary imposed visa restrictions on PRC officials for their involvement in repressive acts against members of ethnic and religious minority groups and religious and spiritual practitioners inside and outside of China's borders, including within the United States.

We are also focused on curbing the ability of countries to perpetrate these abuses by engaging third countries that may be implicated, willingly or not, in transnational repression efforts, as well as international law enforcement agencies and the private sector. For example, we are facilitating more rapid diplomacy for individuals at risk of involuntary return ("refoulement"), including immediate and high-level engagement with host governments.

We are also taking action on the technologies that may be used to conduct transnational attrition. During the Summit for Democracy, the Administration announced an Executive Order to prohibit the U.S. government use of commercial spyware that poses a risk to national security, and risk of misuse by foreign governments to enable human

rights abuses, demonstrating U.S. leadership and commitment to countering the misuse of commercial spyware and other surveillance technology. The Executive Order serves as a foundation to deepen international cooperation, and we are collaborating with allies and partners to promote responsible policies and practices, discourage the misuse of these tools around the world, and spur industry reform.

We are also increasing engagement with INTERPOL on the so-called “poison pen” issue—that is, putting bad information into the international system—resulting in cases such as innocent Uyghurs having red notices applied to them. We share publicly many of the actions we are taking because we want people to know the United States will not tolerate these abuses within our borders.

- 4) **Resilience** - We are building the resilience of targeted communities to transnational repression in the U.S. and around the world, including through listening sessions led by U.S. government officials, to better understand their needs and develop tailored responses. Through our engagement in Washington and at our embassies, we proactively engage with affected communities, understanding their challenges, and developing solutions in partnership. While not always the case, oftentimes targeted individuals belong to communities marginalized for various reasons, including based on their ethnic or religious identity. Our federal assistance programs empower civil society activists and others to mitigate and counter transnational repression by providing documentation and digital security tools.

In closing, I would like to echo the words that Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Uzra Zeya, delivered last year during Congressional testimony on transnational repression. While her remarks were specific to the PRC, I think we can all agree that they reflect the grave risk that transnational repression poses around the world.

In characterizing the PRC's transnational repression she said, "It is the most sophisticated form of repression that exists in the world today. It is pervasive, it is pernicious, and it presents a threat to the values we hold dear as Americans and the integrity of the rules-based international order."

For the reasons articulated by the Under Secretary, we will continue to address transnational repression with the seriousness and attention it deserves.