



Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief – Evidence from Freedom House’s Transnational Repression Dataset

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To the Commissioners, thank you for the invitation to testify at USCIRF, and thank you for the opportunity to share information about transnational repression of religious freedom or belief. I will focus my brief spoken remarks on understanding transnational repression and on specific cases concerning religious freedom, especially emanating from Central Asia. I’ll conclude with very brief remarks about US policy on transnational repression.

Transnational repression¹ encompasses cross-border acts of intimidation, violence, and harassment. This term is not intended to describe a new or discrete form of human rights violation, but rather violations of a uniquely transnational nature because they are perpetrated by one state within the national jurisdiction of another. As such, acts of transnational repression have specific legal, social, political, and national security implications distinct from human rights violations committed by a government within its own jurisdiction. We see transnational repression as part of the broader problem of authoritarian states seeking to impose their form of governance outside of their borders—the phenomenon we and others call “global authoritarianism.”

At Freedom House, we have compiled a global dataset of direct, physical acts of transnational repression. It now includes 854 incidents since 2014.² Of those 854 cases, 35% have a religious character, meaning there is some element in them that corresponds to an existing pattern of religious persecution in the origin country. Of that 35%, three-quarters originate from the People’s Republic of China, which has pursued the world’s most comprehensive campaign of transnational repression. I’m sure other panelists will speak about the PRC’s campaigns in more depth.

The other origin countries that stand out from this perspective are Egypt, which has pursued the Muslim Brotherhood in a wide-ranging campaign of transnational repression that covers 36 cases in our dataset; and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which have pursued political opponents abroad in cases also marked by religious difference. Allow me to focus on the Central Asian cases.

Tajikistan is one of the most prolific perpetrators of transnational repression in the world, and is recommended for designation of CPC by USCIRF. Despite a population of only 10 million people,

¹ Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression*, Freedom House, February 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Complete_FH_TransnationalRepressionReport2021_rev020221.pdf.

² Yana Gorokhovskaia, Nate Schenkkan, and Grady Vaughan, *Still Not Safe: Transnational Repression in 2022*, Freedom House, April 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/FH_TransnationalRepression2023_0.pdf.



Tajikistan has the third-most direct, physical cases in the world in our dataset. Among those targeted are members of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, or IRPT. The IRPT was banned in 2015, and has been labeled a terrorist movement by the government. Its members, including the IRPT's leader Muhiddin Kabiri, have been persecuted in exile through Interpol abuse, intimidation, surveillance, harassment of their family members in Tajikistan, and through unlawful deportations. Prominent recent cases concerning the IRPT include the deportation from Germany of Abdullohi Shamsiddin in January 2023.

Members of the Pamiri minority from Gorno-Badakshan, who are typically Ismaili Muslims, face persecution on those grounds as well. There has been a tremendous wave of persecution in the last year after another cycle of protests erupted in Gorno-Badakshan against the repressive government of Tajikistan. In 2022 alone, eleven citizens of Tajikistan were returned from Russia alone via illegal renditions.

Additionally, Tajikistan has had clerics returned illegally from Russia. This includes Saidnuriddin Roziqov, who was picked up off the streets in the Russian town of Rezh and returned illegally to Tajikistan in March 2021.

Uzbekistan also is a prominent practitioner of transnational repression, and is recommended for USCIRF's special watch list. This mirrors Uzbekistan's repression of independent religious practice within the country, a practice that unfortunately did not end with the death of President Islam Karimov in 2016. In the mid-2010s, there were multiple cases of individuals accused of being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir who were returned illegally to Uzbekistan from Russia. In 2014, preacher Abdullah Bukhari was assassinated in Turkey. These concerns regarding transnational repression from Uzbekistan persist. In 2020, an Uzbekistani named Alisher Haydarov who had left Uzbekistan following religious persecution was illegally returned from Ukraine.

Let me close with a few brief words about U.S. policy on transnational repression. There is tremendous bipartisan interest in this topic, and we welcome the attention that members of Congress from both parties have brought to the issue.

The United States is engaged in a whole of government effort coordinated from the White House to formulate policies to combat transnational repression. This includes work from the State Department on diplomatic initiatives, sanctions efforts, and support for activists and human rights defenders around the world; work from the Department of Justice and FBI on investigations and prosecutions; and work from the Department of Homeland Security on training for employees to respond to manipulation of our immigration system by foreign actors and Interpol abuse. There are also counterintelligence initiatives and efforts to reduce the use of commercial spyware.

We commend the progress that has been made in the last two years thanks to the commitment of many people working inside the US government on this issue. We also commend USCIRF for its growing attention to this issue, through this hearing as well as through its most recent report.

One missing element in US policy that I want to stress is that around the world, most incidents of transnational repression occur through collaboration between an authoritarian origin state and an authoritarian host state. The best protection for individuals against transnational repression is to have authorized legal status to reside within a strong democracy like the United States. This is the surest and most significant way to raise the floor of protection for those individuals.



Therefore we commend USCIRF for its consistent recommendations concerning strengthening refugee resettlement and the asylum process. I recommend to the panel Freedom House's standing policy recommendations concerning asylum,³ including strengthening existing programs, focusing on full status rather than temporary or subsidiary forms of protection, and strengthening resilience against manipulation of asylum claims by foreign governments, which itself can accomplish acts of transnational repression.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to the discussion today.

³ Yana Gorokhovskaia and Isabel Linzer, *Defending Democracy in Exile: Policy Responses to Transnational Repression*, Freedom House, June 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Complete_TransnationalRepressionReport2022_NEW_0.pdf.