

Good morning. My name is Andrea Prasow, and I am Executive Director of the Freedom Initiative, an organization that advocates for the wrongfully detained in the Middle East and North Africa. We work alongside the families of wrongfully detained individuals in the Middle East and North Africa, most frequently in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to advocate for their freedom, tell their stories publicly and urge U.S. policymakers to press for their release. Political detention often serves as the lynchpin of autocracy, allowing authoritarian leaders to induce fear and retain control over their populations. In a world where people are detained over tweets, only a few will dare risk a similar fate. Though the U.S. government has long recognized human rights abuses by authorities in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, including through detailed chapters in the annual State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, U.S. policy towards these governments has been inconsistent. Over the past several years, we have become increasingly concerned about the ways in which authoritarian leaders have been employing the same tactics they use to curtail rights and freedoms at home to silence criticism beyond their own borders, including here in the United States.

Quite simply, authoritarian governments' repression abroad represents an extension of their repression at home. Of course, this is not unique to the MENA region, as is evident from the testimonies of my fellow panelists. But it's worth noting that governments like those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia see themselves as guardians of morality and religion, and as such, view free religious expression as a threat, whether at home or abroad. Religious practice outside those borders, where there may be greater variety of forms of religious expression — such as in the United States where it is protected by the Constitution — may be considered particularly threatening.

In Egypt, for instance, the Quranist community — a small Muslim minority that believes the Quran is the only valid source for Islam — has faced decades of repression, which led Quranist leader Sheikh Ahmed Subhy Mansour to flee Egypt and settle in the U.S. with his family and followers. Mansour was a fellow at USCIRF in 2009 and 2020 and his son, Sherif, is an outspoken rights defender and the MENA Program

Coordinator at the Committee to Protect Journalists. But even after two decades of U.S. citizenship, the family still faces repression. In August 2020, nine of the Mansours' cousins in Egypt were arrested, and his cousin Reda Abdelrahman — who had previously been targeted for his blogging on Quranist issues — was jailed for nearly 18 months. Egyptian authorities are still preventing him from exiting the country to visit his family here in Virginia. Sherif and Ahmed Mansour also face spurious legal charges in Egypt related to terrorism.

The Mansour family's case underscores how the Egyptian government has relied on state hostage-taking and domestic prosecutions to curtail free expression — including free religious expression -abroad. We have also seen cases where the state will prevent scholars of religious freedom issues from freely conducting activities abroad as another mode of restricting free speech. While the detention of scholar Patrick Zaki, for instance, may not be typically conceived as a case of “transnational” repression because he was detained in Egypt, the allegations against Zaki related to “spreading false news inside and outside of the country” and stem from his work on Coptic Christians.

Similarly in Saudi Arabia, we have seen cases of transnational repression that are designed to curtail free religious expression or observance, and which mirror the repressive religious dynamics within the country. As USCIRF has noted in successive country reports, the country's Shi'a minority remains a target of state violence, particularly in the country's eastern provinces. Any demands for greater rights are met harshly, and dozens of Shi'a have been executed in the country for protesting. We are now seeing signs that Saudi Arabia is using its regional influence to target members of the Shi'a minority living outside of the country as well. USCIRF has noted the case of Salma al-Shehab, a University of Leeds PhD student, a mother of two, and a Shi'a woman who tweeted from the U.K. to demand greater respect of rights for women. During a visit to the Kingdom in 2021, she was arrested and initially sentenced to six years in prison. That sentence was increased on appeal in 2022 to 34 years in prison. At that time, it was the longest documented sentence against a women's rights defender in Saudi Arabia. In January 2023, she

was resentenced to 27 –years. In another case, Hassan al-Rabea, a Shi’a man, fled Saudi Arabia for Morocco after members of his family were targeted for having participated in protests,. In February of this year, Morocco extradited al-Rabea back to the Kingdom based on an intelligence request from the Saudis. His fate remains unknown.

Finally, we have seen how strict state interpretations of Islam have also affected those who seek to leave or challenge Islamic norms. This is particularly evident in the LGBTQ+ community. One example is Eden Knight, a Saudi trans woman who settled in the United States, where she discussed her transition and grappled with her faith in online forums. Shortly thereafter, two U.S. investigators reached out to Knight and convinced her to meet with Saudi lawyer Bader al Omair, who bought her meals and rented her an apartment. Omair then pressured her to return to Saudi Arabia, where she was forced to de-transition and eventually took her own life.

In our recent [report](#) on transnational repression in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, we recommend stronger legislation to define, criminalize, and punish this complex phenomenon. The Transnational Repression Policy Act (S.831) introduced by Senator Merkley and cosponsored by Senators Cardin, Hagerty, and Rubio, for example, would mandate the administration devise a strategy to combat transnational repression *writ large*, train federal employees to recognize and understand the issue, and improve reporting requirements for incidents.

While not a panacea, the bill is a crucial step in addressing the growing threats of transnational repression in the U.S., and I would urge the House to quickly introduce a companion bill.

We also recommend that Congress pass legislation and appropriate necessary funding for the creation of an inter-agency task force on transnational repression — one that should incorporate religious freedom experts — to improve coordination within the U.S. government on the evolving transnational repression tactics of foreign governments and conceive of a response.

Members of Congress and the Biden administration must take seriously reports of transnational repression from constituents targeted due to their faith, beliefs or opinions and use public platforms to call out these abuses. By holding this hearing, USCIRF is playing an important role in ensuring that understanding and combatting transnational repression remain important priorities for the United States. This hearing presents an opportunity to bring attention to the complex ways in which transnational repression and restrictions on religious freedom intersect. As the cases I discussed today illustrate, we need more expansive ways of thinking about transnational repression that recognize the varied forms it takes and the insidious ways that it erodes our most prized freedoms of expression and belief.