

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Repression Without Borders

Authoritarian leaders have taken their repressive tactics global.

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By The Editorial Board

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Smiting foes wherever they may be has a firm place in mythology, literature and history. The meddling Greek gods. James Bond's license to kill. Joseph Stalin's hit man who finally caught up with Leon Trotsky in Mexico City. Given this legacy, it is fair to ask why human rights organizations are now raising an alarm about authoritarian leaders who hunt down dissidents far from their borders.

The reason is that the scope, scale and impunity of transnational repression by a new breed of strongmen — intimidating, detaining, assaulting, kidnapping, deporting or assassinating exiled critics — have grown exponentially with globalization, digital connectedness and new methods of surveillance.

Some of the more flagrant examples are well known: the murder and dismemberment of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents in the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul and Russia's use of lethal toxins to murder one former spy, Alexander Litvinenko, and attempt to murder another, Sergei Skripal. Neither Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia nor President Vladimir Putin of Russia made any effort to justify or rationalize the hits; they simply denied personal responsibility.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, by contrast, has openly cast a broad global net for his foes since a coup attempt in July 2016, using both legal and illegal means. According to a major report this year by the human rights organization Freedom House, the dragnet has included at least 58 abductions in 17 countries.

The report documented hundreds more such efforts by authoritarian governments to physically reach across national borders to intimidate, kidnap, arrest or assassinate exiles, most of which attracted little or no news coverage. The organization compiled a list of 608 cases of transnational repression since 2014, conducted in 79 host countries by 31 governments.

Major violators, in addition to Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, included Rwanda, Iran, China and Egypt. The list was "certainly only partial," the report said, and it showed that "what often appear to be isolated incidents — an assassination here, a kidnapping there — in fact represent a pernicious and pervasive threat to human freedom and security."

The worst offender, Freedom House reported, is China. "China conducts the most sophisticated, global and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world," the report said, describing how Beijing marshals its technological prowess, geopolitical clout and vast security apparatus to hound not only the many Chinese people living abroad but also entire ethnic and religious groups, such as Uyghurs, Tibetans and followers of Falun Gong. "The sheer breadth and global scale of the campaign is unparalleled," Freedom House declared.

The massive efforts to extend the powers of the Chinese Communist Party to every corner of the globe originate at the very pinnacle of the party, with Xi Jinping. His sweeping anticorruption drive has targeted thousands of former officials living abroad. In October 2020, Freedom House reported, the U.S. Department of Justice accused eight individuals of acting as illegal agents of China in a multiyear effort to coerce a Chinese individual to return to face trial.

China has also not hesitated to use its economic powers to compel foreign governments in countries as diverse as Thailand, Serbia, Malaysia, Egypt, Kazakhstan, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Nepal to detain and sometimes deport critics, members of targeted minorities and refugees. Most recently, Hong Kong democracy advocates have emerged as targets.

Alexander Cooley, the director of Columbia University's Harriman Institute and a co-author of "Dictators Without Borders," which focuses on Central Asia, told a Senate hearing on the tools of transnational repression in September 2019 that the current wave of extraterritorial repression is "foremost an outcome of the recent global backlash against democratization," which has produced "a more aggressive and a savvier breed of autocrat." These despots have reframed democratic opponents and civil society activists as security threats and decided to pursue them wherever they flee.

What makes the practice especially malign is that in pursuing their critics, authoritarian rulers have often adopted the tools and arguments of liberal democracies, giving their actions the sheen of legitimacy or at least the pretext that everybody does it. The global war on terror launched by the United States in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks two decades ago has provided an especially handy rhetorical tool for painting political gadflies as terrorists or extremists.

Interpol, the international criminal police organization, has been an especially popular tool of the autocrats to hunt down their critics. Though Interpol is specifically precluded in its constitution from using its alert system for political reasons, according to testimony at that 2019 Senate hearing, the volume of Interpol alerts has soared over the past two decades, and among their major users were Russia, China and smaller illiberal governments like Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iran, India and Venezuela. Tajikistan, the smallest of the Central Asian states, with a notoriously brutal government, has alone issued at least 2,500 “red notices,” the Interpol request for worldwide assistance in nabbing a fugitive. Russia is responsible for 38 percent of red notices.

Authoritarian regimes have become savvier about using the internet and social media to track and spy on dissidents. Ramzan Kadyrov, the unapologetically brutal head of Russia’s Chechen Republic, made no bones about that in remarks directed to the Chechen diaspora in 2016, saying, “This modern age and technology allow us to know everything, and we can find any of you.”

The irony is that much of this technology was developed in democracies to safeguard them against the likes of Mr. Kadyrov. Last month, The Washington Post and a number of other news organizations reported that sophisticated Pegasus spyware developed by the Israeli NSO Group apparently has been used by a number of governments to target journalists, human rights activists and private citizens. (NSO has disputed the findings of the investigation.)

The moral ambiguity inherent in such technology makes it difficult to refute the familiar strongman claim that they are only doing what leaders of democracies routinely do. Mr. Kadyrov’s quote is uncomfortably similar to what former President George W. Bush’s press secretary Ari Fleischer said after the C.I.A. began using armed drones to strike at terrorists: “We will fight the war on terrorism wherever we need to fight the war on terrorism.”

The use of lethal drone strikes escalated dramatically under President Barack Obama’s administration. By the end of 2009, his first year in office, the C.I.A. had conducted its 100th drone strike in Pakistan, a country with which the United States was not at war. His administration also ordered the first targeted killing of an American by drone without due process, the strike on Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni American imam, in 2011.

In his four years in the White House, Donald Trump often dispatched with even the fig leaves that past presidents had employed around the rule of law. He demonized his political foes and the free press, spread lies and lauded strongmen. On Mr. Xi’s bid to remain president for life, Mr. Trump said: “I think it’s great. Maybe we’ll have to give that a shot someday.” He also tried every trick to overturn a democratic election.

In the end, Mr. Trump was impeached twice and voted out of office. But the willingness of many of his supporters to embrace authoritarianism should be a warning for our democracy and others.

If the United States is to regain some of its credibility as a defender of human rights and the rule of law around the globe, pushing back on transnational repression would be a good place to start. Targeted sanctions on authoritarian governments can be effective if used wisely. Training employees of the State and Justice Departments to recognize, understand and address the various incarnations of transnational repression would also bring more attention and resources to fight the problem. Making it easier for refugees to escape repression would be in keeping with the country’s long tradition of offering a safe harbor to persecuted and desperate people.

One action waiting to be taken is for Congress to pass the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act, which was introduced in 2019 and was the subject of the hearings at which Mr. Cooley testified. The act would counter efforts by foreign governments to persecute expatriates for unlawful motives and would take measures to combat the abuse of Interpol warrants.

The United States and its allies should become far sterner in dealing with leaders who egregiously hunt down foes beyond their borders, even — or especially — when they are American allies. Unsavory allies may be a fact of international life, but condoning their behavior beyond their borders must not be. Crown Prince Mohammed was extensively and convincingly linked to the murder of Mr. Khashoggi but has been effectively given a pass by Washington. Mr. Erdogan has likewise escaped censure for his dragnet.

Existing laws, including the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, allow for sanctions against perpetrators of serious human rights abuses, including assassinations and renditions. These laws should be used, prioritized, strengthened and enforced. Other useful measures should include steps by the United States and its allies to restrict trade in censorship and surveillance technologies to countries with a penchant for abusing them.

Perhaps most important, the United States and its allies need to make a concerted effort to reach out to diaspora communities on their territory and encourage them to report untoward efforts by leaders or intelligence services from their former lands to threaten, infiltrate, spy on, assail or otherwise harass them. People who seek refuge in free countries, as Mr. Khashoggi did in America, should be clearly beyond the reach of power-hungry despots.

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