



A Light That Cannot Be Extinguished

Exiled Journalism and Transnational Repression

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A LIGHT THAT CANNOT BE EXTINGUISHED: EXILED JOURNALISM AND TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key Findings	1
Introduction	2
Transnational Threats Facing Exiled Journalists	4
Making Hard Work Harder	8
Defiance in the Face of Adversity	9
Media Freedom Under Threat Map	10
Addressing Transnational Repression	13
Recommendations	15
Endnotes	17

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ON THE COVER

Indonesian journalists protest outside the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Jakarta, demanding accountability for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Turkey in October 2018. (NurPhoto SRL / Alamy)

Key Findings

1

Increasing attacks on independent media globally are forcing journalists to flee their home countries. Working from abroad, these reporters remain crucial sources of information about some of the world's most authoritarian countries. But safety in exile is not guaranteed.

2

At least 26 governments, including those of Belarus, Cambodia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, have targeted journalists abroad with transnational repression, putting their safety and work in serious peril.

3

Transnational repression against journalists includes assault, detention, kidnapping, and unlawful deportation, as well as serious limitations on freedom of movement resulting from these threats. It also entails the intimidation of journalists' family members, digital harassment, smear campaigns, doxing, and other attempts to prevent truthful reporting.

4

These attacks have a devastating impact on journalists' well-being, as well as their ability to deliver independent reporting. Exiled reporters struggle to maintain the contacts they need to cover stories. They face death threats, online harassment, and aggressive rhetoric from officials in origin countries. Often in precarious economic situations, they must also shoulder high monetary costs to overcome censorship, protect their digital and physical security, and navigate difficult immigration bureaucracies.

5

Despite these challenges, exiled journalists have developed strategies to keep working. But they need legal, financial, and operational support from host governments, civil society, and media organizations in order to continue to expose human rights violations around the world.

Introduction

Journalists working to expose corruption, crime, human rights violations, and other abuses are being targeted by governments that increasingly apply repressive tactics far beyond their own borders.¹ Just this year, London's Metropolitan Police were summoned to guard the offices of Iran International, a Farsi-language news channel, after staff received death threats over their coverage of protests in Iran.² Russian journalists living in exile in Europe and reporting on the Kremlin's war in Ukraine fell ill with symptoms of poisoning.³ And a Vietnamese blogger who posted critical comments about that country's single-party regime disappeared from the streets of Bangkok only to reappear in a Hanoi prison.⁴

As attacks on free and independent media increase globally,⁵ more and more journalists are being forced to work from exile, and are increasingly facing the threat of transnational repression in their new homes abroad. They face the daily risk of physical harm, detention, and rendition; online harassment and doxing—the publishing of an individual's private information online; reprisals against family members; smear campaigns designed to impugn their credibility; and other efforts that degrade their morale and commitment to the profession. Some, like Jamal Khashoggi, have been assassinated.

To understand how transnational repression impacts journalists in exile, Freedom House interviewed 16 journalists who have sought refuge in democracies across Europe and North America, as well as representatives of civil society and media organizations that support their work. Their experiences vividly illustrate not only the immediate and serious harm that extraterritorial targeting has on journalists' work and lives, but also the many ways that transnational repression exacerbates the challenges—from securing funding to reaching audiences—already faced by exiled media organizations.

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Galina Timchenko

Chief executive officer and publisher, Meduza

Galina Timchenko began working for *Kommersant*, a well-respected Russian newspaper, in 1997. In 2000, she joined the newly formed online outlet Lenta.ru, and four years later became its editor in chief. Under her stewardship, Lenta.ru grew into the number-one internet news source in Russia, attracting 20 million unique views per month by 2014. That year, Timchenko was fired from the outlet after publishing material, including an interview with a Ukrainian politician, about the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea. Thirty-nine of her colleagues resigned in protest. She relocated to Latvia and formed a new Russian-language online media outlet, Meduza. In 2021, Meduza was labeled a "foreign agent" by Russian authorities and in 2023 it was deemed an "undesirable organization," a designation that means anyone working with the outlet is liable to criminal prosecution. Before the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, state media outlets like RT had undertaken a campaign of harassment against Timchenko personally, as well as against Meduza. The

organization's Riga-based office was also vandalized. Since the 2022 invasion, the outlet has been under almost constant digital attack with attempts to disrupt its newsletter distribution, hack its social media accounts, and hinder its crowdfunding efforts. Over the summer, Timchenko received a notification from Apple that "state-sponsored attackers" were targeting her phone; reports later emerged that the phone was infected with Pegasus spyware. Timchenko takes precautions when traveling, conscious of the fact that other Russian journalists working in Europe have been poisoned. But she said her biggest concern is not for her own safety but rather, the challenges of reporting from exile: "It's a very complicated task. We choose a topic. We make a plan. One person, one task...It's dangerous, difficult, expensive, complicated, and very long. We are still reporting, but it has become a tougher and tougher task."



Behrang Tajdin

Journalist, BBC Persian, and National Union of Journalists Representative

Since falling in love with journalism as a university student in Iran two decades ago, Behrang Tajdin has experienced the Iranian regime's increasing attacks against his chosen profession. He joined BBC Persian in London in the midst of the Iranian government's crackdown on opposition voices after the 2009 presidential election. Cast among the regime's "enemies," Iranian journalists in exile have been targeted with death threats, surveillance, hacking attempts, and asset freezes. Like many exiled Iranian journalists, Tajdin constantly worries about relatives living in Iran: "It eats into your morale, especially when you know that the price you are paying, that your family members are paying, for you to do your job is huge." In his relentless mission to deliver information of the highest professional standard, "every single day, it's

a struggle for me, and almost every colleague of mine." The Iranian government's targeting of journalists intensified following widespread protests triggered by the murder of student Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022. Even though journalists are often reluctant to "become the story," Tajdin says that threats "have become so unbearable in the past few years and especially in the past year that we have no choice but to talk about it, to call it out." Exiled Iranian journalists are increasingly seeking protection from host governments and international organizations, including the United Nations. "What we want is a safe environment to do our jobs as journalists."



Transnational Threats Facing Exiled Journalists

Journalists are often in the crosshairs of autocrats seeking to control information and prevent dissent both inside their countries and far beyond their borders. Between 2014 and 2023, Freedom House recorded 112 incidents of physical transnational repression against journalists perpetrated by 26 governments. This data captures only a fraction of the phenomenon, as many incidents are unreported or extremely difficult to conclusively verify.

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Even though exiled journalists run a higher risk of being targeted in nondemocratic countries, threats also follow those who resettle in democracies, which are widely assumed to be safe havens. Roughly half of the journalists interviewed for this report had a background in the profession before entering exile. Most had experienced some form of harassment by authorities while working domestically. The other half, however, became journalists in part because of the repression they experienced at home and abroad. For these individuals, professional journalism allowed them to pursue their activism outside their homeland and find personal fulfillment.

In speaking with journalists working from exile, Freedom House noted the ways that various tactics of transnational repression—both direct and physical as well as indirect and digital—affected their ability to report freely and safely.

Seeding a climate of insecurity

The threat of transnational repression means that physical and digital safety are not assured for people even after they have left the territory of a repressive state. For exiled journalists, security threats complicate their ability to travel, communicate with sources, and report on sensitive issues.

Some journalists interviewed for this report faced ongoing criminal investigations or prosecutions in their countries of origin. While a few of these cases are public, many are dubbed matters of national security and are therefore inaccessible to journalists' lawyers. Such legal harassment not only prevents journalists from returning to their home country for fear of being arrested, it also seriously limits their mobility abroad. Interviewees noted that they avoided traveling to countries that had close ties with their country of origin due to the higher risk of being monitored, detained, or forced to return.⁶ Even in democracies, exiled journalists, like others targeted with transnational repression, can be detained via the abuse of Interpol mechanisms, like notices and diffusions, and through extradition requests and other legal cooperation agreements.⁷

Exiled journalists are also vulnerable to physical attacks and kidnapping. Three Thai men who broadcast radio programs critical of the Thai monarchy from Vietnam were kidnapped and returned to Thailand in 2019, for example.⁸ In 2021, Mahammad Mirzali, a dissident blogger from Azerbaijan living in France, was severely injured in a knife attack by assailants who may have been ordered by the Azerbaijani government to attack him.⁹ The attack followed a series of online threats that aimed to intimidate Mirzali into closing his blog. Also in 2021, Belarusian authorities forced a commercial airplane to land so they could arrest a journalist traveling on board.¹⁰ More recently, there have been reports of Russian journalists falling ill in Europe with symptoms of poisoning.¹¹ Even in the United States, exiled journalists like Taing Sarada, the anchor of The Cambodia Daily, fear being surveilled and are concerned about their physical safety.¹²

Journalists Freedom House spoke to took precautions to ensure their safety, including buying train and plane tickets at the last minute to make tracking them more difficult, and carrying all hygiene products with them to mitigate the risk of poisoning.¹³ These measures may provide some level of protection, but they are expensive, sometimes impractical, and psychologically taxing. They make doing the work of journalism more difficult.

In addition to physical threats, digital threats also destabilize media organizations and their journalists by forcing them to constantly evaluate risks and devise new mitigation strategies.

The team at Meduza, a Latvian-based outlet covering Russia, frequently conducts “disaster scenarios” to assess evolving threats to their infrastructure, which have included attacks on their email newsletters, fake complaints to the email service that they use, constant distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, phishing, and attempts to hack journalists’ phones and disrupt Meduza’s online systems.¹⁴

Targeted and relentless abuse online can encourage self-censorship. For example, women journalists in the Iranian diaspora have faced virulent gendered abuse online because of their work, including death threats, rape threats, and the dissemination of personal information. Women journalists and fixers reporting on China from abroad have also been doxed, with their personal information and location being posted to escort sites.¹⁵ Online trolls have created fake Facebook pages impersonating US-based Cambodian journalist Taing Sarada to discredit his work and mislead his audience.¹⁶ The difficulty of identifying the people and groups responsible for digital attacks makes it hard for journalists to determine the real-world danger of such threats. Some have left social media or restricted public appearances.¹⁷

Surveillance, and even the threat of surveillance, hinders journalists’ ability to communicate safely with sources in their home countries, which is vital to their reporting. Kiyya Baloch, a Pakistani freelance journalist living in exile in Norway, said that sources exercise extreme caution for fear of the potential repercussions they might face: “Most of my sources are too afraid to openly talk to me...The medium I use to talk to them is their first concern...whether it is safe or not.”¹⁸ Similarly, Tashi Wangchuk, who works for Radio Free Asia’s Tibetan Service, explained the measures he has to take to reduce the risk of endangering sources: “I am cautious sharing information over email, and will choose other methods when the information is confidential or when talking to sources, because that could put them into jail just talking to us.”¹⁹ Aware of cases of informants collecting information on behalf of the Chinese government in Europe and Turkey,²⁰ Uyghur journalists living in the United States are wary of spies within their own diaspora community, said Mamatjan Juma, deputy director of Radio Free Asia’s (RFA) Uyghur Service. The perception that Chinese authorities “have minders everywhere, eyes everywhere,” discourages journalists from working openly or even at all.²¹

Severing journalists’ ties with their origin countries

In efforts to retain their power, authoritarian regimes employ several tools to cut information links between people outside the country and those within. Increasingly, authorities have imposed domestic shutdowns of internet services and blocked access to international websites and social media platforms to isolate local users from outside content.²² But transnational repression further subverts and erodes the vital ties that exiled journalists have with their support networks and sources back home.

Coercion by proxy, or reprisals and harassment against family members, has long been used as an instrument to pressure journalists into silence.²³ In Xinjiang, Chinese authorities have routinely threatened and detained family members of Uyghur journalists in exile, often leaving the journalists with no information about relatives’ whereabouts or condition. In interviews with Freedom House, several Uyghur journalists in the United States said that they either lost or were forced to cut contact with family members at home.²⁴ “The punishment for a person who speaks truth to power is punishing their entire family,” said Gulchehra Hoja, who saw many of her family members harassed and detained after she joined RFA’s Uyghur Service.²⁵ In addition to having their familial bonds severed, journalists also lose primary connections with their origin country and thus vital sources of information. In other cases, such tactics are powerful enough to force journalists to leave their jobs. Others choose to remain anonymous and refrain from covering certain stories because they want to maintain connections with their families.²⁶

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Nur'iman Abdureshid

Reporter, Uyghur Service, Radio Free Asia

Nur'iman Abdureshid was born and raised in Kashgar, in the Uyghur region. She completed a master's degree in Beijing and was studying for a doctorate in Turkey when in 2017 her mother, father, and two brothers stopped answering their phones. She later learned that they, alongside at least a million other Uyghurs, had been imprisoned in camps in the region. Abdureshid began working for Radio Free Asia's Uyghur language service in 2020, hoping journalism would help her access information about her family. Not only has she not been able to ascertain the fate of her family members, but she is also routinely harassed online with vulgar threats and accusations that she is working for the US government. Abdureshid has experienced great psychological harm as a

result of her separation from her family: "I wake up from a nightmare screaming...it weighs heavily on me. What's happening with my mom and my dad? Are they alive or dead?" She views her journalism not only as providing truthful information that counters propaganda spread by Chinese authorities about the situation in the Uyghur region, but also as a way to preserve and promote Uyghur culture. She also hopes that one day her family can hear her on the radio themselves: "I'm trying to do my best in the studio every time. I imagine my dad and my brothers and my mom listening to my voice."



Kiyya Baloch

Freelance journalist

Kiyya Baloch began his journalism career in 2012 as a university student in Islamabad, Pakistan. Hailing from the southwestern province of Balochistan, Baloch reported on human rights abuses committed by the Pakistani security services and military in the region. Due to pressure from his editor at the *Daily Times* to stop covering these issues, he resigned in 2015, opting instead to do freelance work for outlets like the *Guardian*. While covering China's increasing presence in Balochistan, as well as enforced disappearances in the region, he and his foreign colleagues became the target of physical intimidation by the Pakistani security services: he was roughed up during an interrogation, and his house was ransacked. After he was placed on an antiterrorism watchlist in January 2017, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the EU Human Rights Defenders mechanism, ProtectDefenders. EU, helped to relocate him to Norway for a master's program in journalism. However, he remained vulnerable to

targeting while abroad. In 2020, he discovered that he was on another watchlist released by the Pakistani government for his alleged "anti-Pakistan activities." A Norwegian diplomat advised him to acquire a safety alarm from local law enforcement, and Norway's domestic security agency informed him that there was a potential threat to his life outside of Norway. The Pakistani military, meanwhile, harassed his relatives back home. Transnational repression has complicated his ability to report, as many of his sources no longer want to speak openly with him. But amid growing restrictions on media freedom inside Pakistan, Baloch thinks his work has taken on greater significance: "Journalism in exile is activism for me now."





Designed to undermine media professionals, targeted smear campaigns launched by authorities and state media outlets can also discredit journalists in the eyes of their audiences and sources. Turkish journalist Amberin Zaman described how some of her sources have shunned her for fear of repercussion: “When they realize you are radioactive, they keep you at arm’s length.”²⁷ Being painted as an enemy of the state, a traitor, or an extremist can also cause serious strain on individuals’ personal lives. A journalist from Turkey working in the United States who wished to remain anonymous shared how persistent campaigns of character assassination against them had resulted in tensions with their family back home, and that over time this had such an effect that “you try to be invisible.”²⁸

Taking a toll

Transnational repression has a cumulative effect on journalists’ mental health and places a heavy burden on their mission to cover issues that would otherwise go unreported. In interviews, a range of journalists shared how the toll of

relentless pressure, threats, and online abuse, including harassment of their families, affected their morale. Some have chosen to remove themselves from the public eye for fear of wider reprisals over their coverage. For example, the same Turkish journalist said that they were unable to openly cover the Turkish general election in 2023 due to an ongoing criminal case against them, as well as because they did not want to endanger their colleagues, who could risk reprisals for associating with them as they worked to cover the polls. Reflecting on how they were shut out of an important political moment in the country, the journalist was visibly shaken during the interview.

The risks of transnational repression can discourage journalists who are uniquely placed to explain the issues and policies within their origin countries from entering this line of work in the first place. For instance, Uyghur journalists in the United States noted how difficult it was to recruit qualified members of their community to work for a Uyghur Service, at a time when capacity was already stretched.²⁹

Making Hard Work Harder

In addition to impeding reporting work, transnational repression severely compounds a range of existing challenges already faced by diaspora and exiled media. Newly arrived exiles fleeing repression at home are likely to lack organizational support, and are often in precarious legal, professional, and financial positions than those working for established outlets or even small outlets with a track record of working from abroad. Issues around legal residency, banking, generating financial support, guarding against digital attacks, protecting sources, and integrating into host countries are made more acute by transnational repression.

To begin, exiled journalists must settle in a host country. Obtaining legal status, whether through residency permits or asylum, is one of the first major bureaucratic hurdles that they encounter after relocation. Several journalists that Freedom House interviewed faced challenges due to delays in the immigration and asylum process in their host countries.³⁰ Individuals who receive temporary status designations in host countries are stuck in a precarious position, often unable to travel for work or take advantage of support granted to citizens and recognized refugees.³¹ Criminal accusations made by origin country authorities often complicate this already arduous process by forcing journalists seeking asylum to prove that they are not a security threat to the host country. Criminal accusations can also impact journalists'

ability to access commercial services. One Turkish journalist interviewed by Freedom House had two US bank accounts closed, likely because of unfounded terrorism accusations against them made by the government of Turkey.³²

Journalism from exile is not only dangerous, but also expensive. Media outlets that have been forced out of their home countries have had to devise new business models that must account for the loss of their traditional revenue sources, as well as the added costs of digital security and content-delivery systems. In Russia, Belarus, and Iran, sources of revenue that once sustained independent outlets have been cut off by both domestic legal crackdowns that make collecting revenue through advertising or crowdfunding impossible, as well as international sanctions that interfere with subscriptions and monetization of online content.³³ Because of unrelenting attacks on their digital infrastructure, many exiled outlets must also devote a large share of their limited resources to digital security. In sum, outlets are forced to spend money they do not have to continue to deliver information to audiences who cannot pay. Moreover, media organizations operating in exile have to figure out technical methods to deliver content to domestic audiences who are actively prevented from accessing it by repressive internet controls in places like China, Iran, and Russia.³⁴

Not only are exiled journalists further away from unfolding events on the ground, but criminal laws within authoritarian countries penalize cooperation with independent media and force journalists to maintain difficult, secretive contacts with their sources. For the Russian outlet Meduza, for example, being labeled an “undesirable organization” by Vladimir Putin’s regime has meant that Russians face legal repercussions for supporting or cooperating with the staff.³⁵

Language and cultural barriers can discourage collaboration between exiled and local journalists.³⁶ In some extreme cases, democratic governments may see exiled journalists as security threats to be monitored and surveilled.³⁷

Issues around legal residency, banking, generating financial support, guarding against digital attacks, protecting sources, and integrating into host countries are made more acute by transnational repression.

Defiance in the Face of Adversity

Free and independent media play a vital role in supporting democracy and countering authoritarianism by holding the powerful to account, uncovering abuses and rights violations, providing factual information, and representing marginalized groups. Despite the high costs associated with pursuing their work in exile, many journalists interviewed for this report remain determined to defend their professionalism and the value of independent news in the face of growing authoritarianism. As one Turkish journalist working from Europe noted: “The hard core of journalism, an indivisible part of our profession, is continuously being critical in covering power structures.”³⁸

Exiled journalists with first-hand knowledge or contacts on the inside can be the sole sources of information about events in authoritarian countries and in conflict zones. Their work supplies much-needed information that may be hard to uncover or overlooked by foreign press, or off-limits to domestic reporters. In 2017, RFA’s Uyghur Service was among the first outlets to shed light on the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and other Muslims in camps in Xinjiang.³⁹ As Tashi Wangchuk, an editor working for RFA’s Tibetan Service, said: “When we reveal certain information, we reveal the truth.”⁴⁰

Journalism from exile is also a means to preserve a culture that may be threatened by an authoritarian regime. Nur’iman Abdureshid, a reporter with RFA’s Uyghur Service, took pleasure in working on stories that nurtured Uyghur culture and language: “I like to do programs about how the Uyghur community is refreshing themselves in diaspora and how it is surviving.”⁴¹ Kiyya Baloch spoke about the need to highlight issues affecting his ethnic Baloch community in Pakistan through his work, first at home and then from abroad:

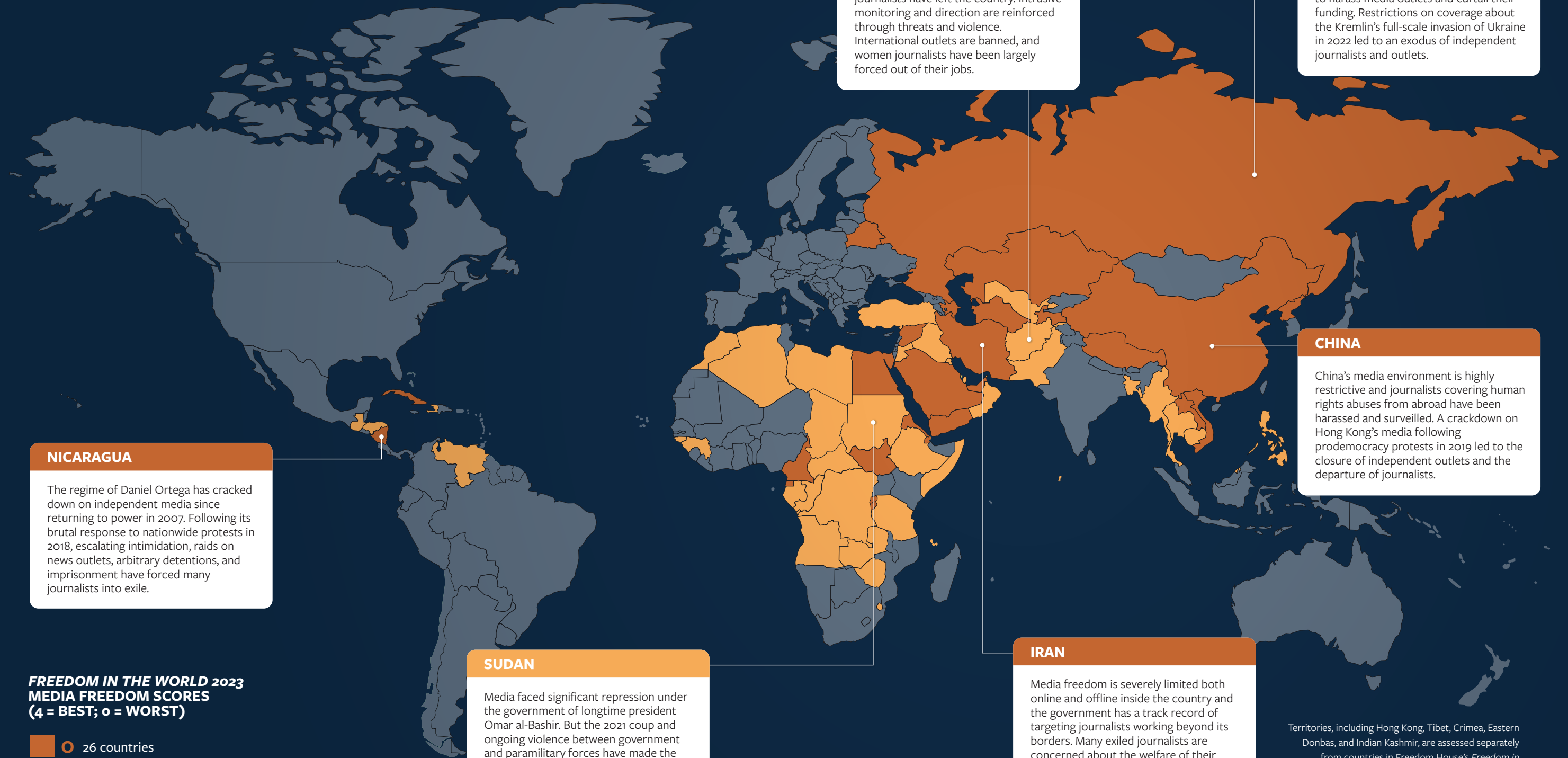
“I saw my people suffering, being killed, being forcefully disappeared... I wanted to be their voice. I wanted to bring their stories to the world.”⁴²

This relentless pursuit of the truth motivates many journalists to find ways to adapt and overcome the hurdles of reporting from afar. Working for Radio Free Europe’s Russian Service from Europe, Artyom Radygin noted that even though he would prefer covering stories on the ground, he and his colleagues have adapted so they can continue to put out high-quality reporting: “We are not stopping our work, we are just changing it...If we don’t have an opportunity to make a great picture, we will better spend this time on digging deeper into documents and databases and finding something new.”⁴³ This willpower was echoed by others who have chosen this path at great personal cost. For Gulchehra Hoja, who is amongst several Uyghur journalists working for RFA and whose relatives are held in internment camps: “It encouraged me to work more, work hard to find out what the Chinese government is really doing, and to show to the world. Whatever they hide, I just want to dig in.”⁴⁴

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MEDIA FREEDOM UNDER THREAT

In countries around the world, media freedom is absent or severely constrained and intensifying crackdowns have pushed journalists into exile. But persecution does not always stop at the borders.



AFGHANISTAN

Since the Taliban overthrew the elected government in 2021, hundreds of journalists have left the country. Intrusive monitoring and direction are reinforced through threats and violence. International outlets are banned, and women journalists have been largely forced out of their jobs.

RUSSIA

Laws on extremism, foreign agents, and undesirable organizations have been used to harass media outlets and curtail their funding. Restrictions on coverage about the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to an exodus of independent journalists and outlets.

CHINA

China's media environment is highly restrictive and journalists covering human rights abuses from abroad have been harassed and surveilled. A crackdown on Hong Kong's media following prodemocracy protests in 2019 led to the closure of independent outlets and the departure of journalists.

IRAN

Media freedom is severely limited both online and offline inside the country and the government has a track record of targeting journalists working beyond its borders. Many exiled journalists are concerned about the welfare of their families in Iran.

Territories, including Hong Kong, Tibet, Crimea, Eastern Donbas, and Indian Kashmir, are assessed separately from countries in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report. See the *Freedom in the World* methodology for details on how territories are assessed.

NICARAGUA

The regime of Daniel Ortega has cracked down on independent media since returning to power in 2007. Following its brutal response to nationwide protests in 2018, escalating intimidation, raids on news outlets, arbitrary detentions, and imprisonment have forced many journalists into exile.

SUDAN

Media faced significant repression under the government of longtime president Omar al-Bashir. But the 2021 coup and ongoing violence between government and paramilitary forces have made the country extremely perilous for journalists covering human rights abuses.

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023 MEDIA FREEDOM SCORES (4 = BEST; 0 = WORST)

- 26 countries
- 40 countries

Amberin Zaman

Chief correspondent, Al-Monitor

Amberin Zaman began her career in the early 1990s covering domestic politics, diplomacy, conflicts, and Kurdish issues in Iraq, Turkey, and the wider Middle East and Caucasus. During her time working as the *Economist's* Turkey correspondent, she was repeatedly singled out for criticism by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who, during a campaign rally in 2014, called her “a militant in the guise of a journalist, a shameless woman,” adding, “Know your place!” Though she still reports on Turkey’s domestic and foreign issues, Zaman has not returned to the country since 2020. Beginning in 2019, Turkish authorities opened several criminal probes with accusations based on her work as journalist, including conducting interviews with Turkish opposition leaders and Syrian Kurdish leaders. Zaman has repeatedly been attacked



online in what she describes as “cyber lynchings.” She was threatened by Turkish security agents while attending a speech by Erdoğan at the Brookings Institute in Washington, DC, in 2016. More recently, her reporting work in Iraq and Syria has been interrupted by threats of assassination via Turkish drone strikes posted on social media, and the Metropolitan police have installed a panic button in her home in London. Despite all this, Zaman continues her work: “I feel that my role now is to write the stories that people who are in [Turkey] cannot write, cannot possibly write. And they should not be left unwritten.”

Tashi Wangchuk

Senior editor, Tibet Service, Radio Free Asia

Tashi Wangchuk joined the Voice of Tibet, a prominent Tibetan exile radio station, in 2002 while living in India. His work brought him into close contact with monks and other high-profile Tibetan activists. When he suspected that his communications were being surveilled, he used coded language in interviews and refused to print stories that might reveal the identities of his sources. In 2015, three years after moving to the United States, Tashi Wangchuk began working for Radio Free Asia. There, he continues to report on how the Chinese government infringes on the cultural and political rights of Tibetans, which has led to constant



harassment on social media by the so-called “50-cent army”—online commenters hired by the Chinese Communist Party. Smear campaigns have become a feature of his life: “[Online harassment] is like there’s a sunrise and there’s a noon and there’s a sunset.” Tashi Wangchuk remains committed to delivering credible and incisive news. He says honest reporting is the hallmark of his journalistic ethos: “The Chinese government fears the truth.”

Addressing Transnational Repression

Although governments are becoming more aware of the problem of transnational repression, people remain exposed to physical and digital threats due to the lack of a coordinated approach among national authorities, civil society, and technology companies. Many exiled journalists are left to craft their own strategies to mitigate threats, or rely on ad hoc professional support and government assistance to protect themselves and their loved ones, and to continue working.

Digital and physical safety measures

Journalists at risk of transnational repression have some strategies for protecting themselves. Among the most prominent are digital hygiene practices: precautions like using different devices for personal and professional communication, avoiding online platforms susceptible to government monitoring, attending digital security trainings, and staying alert to cyberattacks and phishing attempts,⁴⁵ including by monitoring warnings issued by Apple, Google, and social media platforms.⁴⁶ While these practices can increase the safety of individual journalists, they are time consuming, resource intensive, and can unfairly shift the burden of mitigating transnational repression on to potential victims who are most vulnerable.

Existing tools for mitigating the threat of digital transnational repression also fall short, according to several interviewed activists. While most platforms offer ways for journalists to flag abuse or protect their accounts, these are inadequate in the face of well-funded, state-directed cyberharassment campaigns. Reporting and blocking bots has become more difficult on X, since Elon Musk acquired the platform.⁴⁷ RFA Uyghur Service deputy director Mamatjan Juma emphasized that individual users cannot halt an onslaught of abuse themselves: “Chinese bots are everywhere. It’s multiplied at this moment. It’s impossible...for us to block them all.” Even when a company like Meta discovers the source of a troll or fake account on one of its platforms, the company may withhold this information from the targeted journalists.⁴⁸ Overwhelmed exiled journalists working in small teams without the capacity or time to report attacks often give up. By placing the responsibility on targeted journalists to track online abuse and follow a complicated set of protocols

Although governments are becoming more aware of the problem of transnational repression, people remain exposed to physical and digital threats due to the lack of a coordinated approach among national authorities, civil society, and technology companies.

to mitigate it, companies reinforce the power imbalance between perpetrator governments and their targets.

As with digital threats, exiled journalists have also developed practices to enhance their physical safety. These include not disclosing their residential addresses or even sometimes which country they have relocated to. For many journalists, traveling—a key part of the job—has become extremely dangerous, exposing them to the risk of detention, deportation, poisoning, and kidnapping. Measures to counter these threats also fall largely to individuals, who must spend time and resources protecting themselves.

Support from the host country

In their host countries, exiled journalists have sought help from law enforcement, policymakers, and diplomats with varying rates of success. One way law enforcement has helped individuals under duress is to offer them security protections. Police in the United Kingdom and Norway have given those facing direct physical harm safety-alarm watches, or installed panic buttons in their houses.⁴⁹ Law enforcement may reiterate the messaging of digital-security training, recommending that activists not disclose their address or share location details with relatives over the phone.⁵⁰ However, cases of digital harassment are often not addressed by law enforcement because of gaps in criminal laws or an inability to identify suspects.

Exiled journalists have also appealed to host country diplomats to either highlight transnational repression in bilateral meetings with their origin country, or advocate for their targeted family members at home.⁵¹ Some attribute the release of imprisoned family members in the homeland to diplomatic efforts, but public interventions on behalf of journalists, especially exiled ones, remain rare.

One of the most significant shortcomings identified by journalists interviewed for this report was a lack of any practical follow-up after reporting cases of transnational repression. Those who met with US State Department officials to discuss the harassment and intimidation of their family members back home said they have waited years to hear any updates about their relatives, often to no avail. Sometimes, targeted journalists learn about the fate of relatives from government officials or even see their release through diplomacy, but then contact ceases without explanation.⁵² Shohret Hoshur, a Uyghur journalist with RFA, described how the US State Department helped secure the release of two of his brothers from detention in 2014, but over the last year has not responded to his requests for information about further action on behalf of other imprisoned family members. Although transnational repression, and especially the targeting of family members, poses a difficult policy challenge for governments, a lack of communication can leave exiled journalists feeling vulnerable and without support from their democratic hosts.

Public shows of solidarity were especially valued by those interviewees. Exiled journalists reiterated that governments standing up for them publicly was an essential component

of affirming the democratic value of a free media. “When they [democratic governments] talk about free speech and democracy...then I think they have to talk about this [exiled journalists] very openly,” said Kiyya Baloch, freelance journalist from Pakistan.⁵³

Support from colleagues

Exiled journalists also receive support from media organizations and civil society. For those at larger corporations, in-house guidance from security departments and public relations managers serves as a valuable resource for journalists hesitant to reach out directly to law enforcement or government officials. Some outlets such as the BBC preemptively warn staff of transnational threats.⁵⁴ Freelance journalists and contributors to smaller outlets, on the other hand, may not enjoy the same level of institutional support and must individually assess risks. Beyond newsroom support, journalists’ unions and media support organizations, including Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), draw on existing networks to direct individuals to security experts. Generally, institutional programs that help exiled journalists do not directly address transnational repression, but rather help journalists proceed through complex immigration systems, or fund struggling outlets trying to rebuild themselves in a new host country.

Civil society media groups and fellow journalists also raise awareness of the intimidation of individuals and their family members back home.⁵⁵ Many journalists are reluctant to write about their own struggles because they do not view the act of writing about themselves as journalism. One RFA media professional expressed the concern that doing so could bring their whole body of work into doubt; that “someone’s going to question the credibility of your journalism.”⁵⁶ For journalists unwilling to make themselves the “center” of the story, this external media coverage by colleagues is essential to promoting advocacy on their cases.

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Recommendations

Transnational repression poses a threat to physical safety and freedoms to which all individuals, including journalists in exile, are entitled. The following recommendations lay out strategies that democratic governments, technology companies, and civil society organizations can adopt to support journalists targeted by transnational repression and increase accountability for perpetrators.

For Governments

- **Support exiled journalists and media outlets.** Exiled journalists play a key role in exposing abuses by the world's most repressive regimes. Governments should speak publicly about the importance of exiled media in efforts to promote democracy and counter authoritarianism, and work with like-minded states to develop multilateral measures for their protection. Endorsement of the Media Freedom Coalition's statement on transnational repression of journalists is a good foundation for further efforts to combat the phenomenon.⁵⁷
- **Establish clear pathways for exiled journalists to receive permanent legal status in host countries.** Host countries should consider appropriate mechanisms, including providing special visas, such as humanitarian visas or visas for human rights defenders, to help exiled journalists secure legal status. Countries should also review their asylum processes to ensure that exiled journalists are not being denied legal status as a result of illegitimate criminal charges leveled against them by origin country governments.
- **Impose targeted, coordinated, and multilateral sanctions on perpetrators and enablers of transnational repression against exiled journalists.** Legislation like the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act in the United States provides a mechanism for imposing travel bans and asset freezes on perpetrators of serious human rights abuses. Issuing sanctions for acts of transnational repression in particular would send a strong signal that perpetrators will be held accountable. Countries that possess Magnitsky-style laws should fully enforce them, and countries that lack such legal authorities should enact them. Whenever possible, governments should apply sanctions in a coordinated, multilateral manner for maximum impact.
- **Adopt safeguards to protect journalists and their sources from intrusive surveillance.** Restrict the export of surveillance technology, giving extra scrutiny

to export licensing applications from countries whose governments may engage in transnational repression, and strictly regulate the purchase and use of spyware tools. Protect end-to-end encryption to ensure journalists can communicate confidentially with their sources via secure communication platforms

For Civil Society and Media Organizations

- **Develop a plan to spread awareness of transnational repression** among staff in newsrooms, so that outlets are better able to recognize incidents and respond to threats. Media organizations should hire security experts to monitor common tactics of transnational repression, increase protections against digital attacks, and handle immediate physical threats against journalists.
- **Invest in psychosocial support for journalists affected by transnational repression.** Journalists covering diaspora issues and developments in their origin countries may be processing trauma in addition to stress from targeting they face due to their work. Often separated from their families and close friends, journalists can benefit from counselling and community building in their host countries.
- **Issue travel advisories, and provide extra support to exiled journalists visiting potentially dangerous third countries.** Travel advisories based on the likely threat of transnational repression can be modeled on those currently offered by the U.S. Department of State. This would help journalists in transit or on assignment take additional safety precautions in countries where they may be vulnerable to transnational repression.
- **Create and invest in networks that connect exiled journalists and outlets to funding and support.** The JX Fund and programs like it are building bridges between newly exiled journalists, civil society organizations, donors, and international programs. More efforts like this are needed, especially if they can connect recently exiled

media now operating in Europe, to more established exiled media that have been working for some time in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For Companies

- **Expand special protections and safety settings for journalists who are vulnerable to transnational repression.** Journalists are targeted by organized smear campaigns, trolling, and doxing. Platforms should make it easier for them to efficiently remove, report, and document these messages. Ensuring that there are a meaningful and timely responses entails company investment in staff working on issues related to the protection of journalists, including trust and safety teams and regional and country specialists.
- **Publicly identify governments that use digital transnational repression and document their tactics,** insofar as such revelations do not expose targeted individuals to harm, in order to raise awareness of this threat online.

- **Ensure that commercial services, both technical and financial, are not denied indiscriminately or automatically to exiled journalists as a result of overcompliance with sanctions or de-risking practices.** Tech companies complying with sanctions should meet with exiled media so they are aware of how their business practices could directly or indirectly adversely affect monetization efforts and revenue streams that exiled media depend on. Financial institutions should consider whether their current practices to mitigate risk—whether reputational, regulatory, or sanctions-related—adversely impact exiled journalists by terminating or restricting their access to essential services. De-risking practices that result in indiscriminate or automatic deprivation of banking services for journalists working in exile should be avoided.

For more recommendations to address transnational repression, visit <https://freedomhouse.org/policy-recommendations/transnational-repression>.

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