Repressive regimes are tightening their grip on their citizens abroad

A sorry tale of killings, kidnappings and technologically enhanced intimidation

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AT FIRST GLANCE, a murder in Istanbul, an abduction in Dubai and a deportation from Austria may seem to be unrelated. But they are all part of a disturbing pattern of behaviour by authoritarian regimes, which are using violence, intimidation and technology to silence dissent abroad. A report published on February 4th by Freedom House, a think-tank, argues that "transnational repression" has become more common. It found that 31

states had physically attacked their citizens living in other countries since 2014, with China, Russia and Rwanda among the worst offenders. China alone is responsible for 214 of the 608 direct attacks recorded. Millions more have been intimidated by harassment, digital surveillance and smear campaigns.

Regimes differ in the way they choose their targets. China goes after a wide variety of victims: religious and ethnic minorities such as the Uyghurs, political dissidents, human-rights activists, journalists and former princelings. Russia targets outspoken politicians and former insiders who might spill President Vladimir Putin's secrets. The Kremlin does not usually harass ordinary Russians abroad. However, the regime in Chechnya, a violent Russian republic, does. Chechens who have fled to western Europe are routinely spied on, threatened and occasionally killed. Iran and Saudi Arabia target outspoken exiles. Turkey hunts for Gulenists, members of an Islamic group whom President Recep Tayyip Erdogan blames for an attempted coup in 2016.

Physical attacks, such as murders, assaults, detentions and illegal deportations, are the most direct method of crushing enemies abroad. Freedom House believes there have been many more cases than it has managed to count. Blatant assassinations, such as the dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and a columnist for the *Washington Post*, in his country's consulate in Istanbul, are quite rare. Illegal deportations

and forced renditions, favourite tactics of Iran and Turkey, are more discreet. Dissenters can be hauled back home, tortured and sometimes executed away from the gaze of disapproving foreigners.

Grabbing people on foreign soil can be hard to do alone, so many countries turn for help to friendly foreign powers or even to formal international agreements. The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, a security pact involving China, India, Russia and five Asian "stans", has a shared "blacklist" of dissidents. Saudi Arabia uses the Gulf Co-operation Council to keep tabs on unreliable exiles.

Democracies can be unwitting accomplices. In March 2020 Austria complied with a request to deport Hizbullo Shovalizoda, an activist, back to Tajikistan. Austria's Supreme Court later invalidated his extradition, but he is now serving a 20-year prison sentence for extremism. Rogue regimes have long manipulated the "red notices" of Interpol, an international policing organisation, to snare their opponents abroad (Russia has issued more than 40% of all such requests for arrest pending extradition now in circulation). And America's "war on terror" provided regimes with both a model for rendition and a criminal label for those they want to abuse: 58% of the victims identified by Freedom House had been accused of terrorism.

Governments can also make exiles' lives difficult in more subtle ways. Common tactics include withholding travel

documents, denying consular services and threatening relatives back home. For example, in its attempt to shut down the website of a group of Ahmadis, a religious minority, in America, Pakistan has reminded the exiles that Ahmadis back home can be charged with blasphemy for referring to themselves as Muslims. Since many have relatives in Pakistan, where blasphemy is punishable by death, this is a potent threat.

Technology is making it easier for states to oppress at a distance. The internet and social-media networks which at first connected and empowered dissidents can now trap them, explains Marcus Michaelsen, a researcher who studies authoritarian politics. The Arab Spring a decade ago was a turning point. From thousands of kilometres away, states are now able to track the movements of anyone with a smartphone or a laptop, deploying surveillance software and malware to monitor and harass them. Some even have "backdoor access" to social-media platforms. Saudi Arabia bribed a Saudi programmer at Twitter to provide the whereabouts of troublesome tweeters. China is believed to exercise control over WeChat, a lifeline for Chinese abroad. Such technologies make it easier not only to find out where people are, but then to threaten them, or worse.

Technology also makes repressive regimes more aware of far-flung dissidents' grumbling. Once they had no idea what the diaspora said about the tyrant back home. Now they can monitor social media and hear every

unencrypted and possibly seditious word. This makes the exiles seem more of a threat, so repressive regimes feel more impelled to go after them.

The technology and tactics of extraterritorial repression are, for their perpetrators, helpfully inexpensive. "More and more states are realising that this is easy to do and fairly cheap," says Gerasimos Tsourapas, of the University of Birmingham. Rwanda, a small, fairly poor African country, is a striking example. Determined to silence those who challenge its self-image as an African "development darling"—and to crack down on those who question its version of the country's bloody history—the government extends its repressive reach far beyond its borders. Last year Paul Rusesabagina, a former hotelier whose heroism saving Tutsis during the genocide was portrayed in the film "Hotel Rwanda", was kidnapped in Dubai and brought home. He has since been charged with terrorism; many suspect his real crime is to be an outspoken opponent of Rwanda's autocratic president, Paul Kagame. Like China, Rwanda seeks to control its people abroad through spyware, an army of social-media trolls, and a coercive network of embassies and expatriate organisations. Senior regime insiders who defect have the most to fear. A former intelligence chief, for example, was strangled in a hotel room in South Africa. But Freedom House says that "all Rwandans are at risk of transnational repression."

One reason why rogue states get away with harassing exiles is that democracies often look the other way.

Sometimes, argues Mr Tsourapas, by acceding to extradition requests and Interpol red notices, and by broadening the definition of terrorism, they have even been complicit.

Extraterritorial repression is not new—Leon Trotsky was in Mexico City, more than 10,000km from Moscow, when Stalin had him murdered with an ice pick. What is new is the ease with which dissidents can be snooped on from afar. This, coupled with the global rise of authoritarian regimes and the disinclination of the previous American administration to advocate human rights, has allowed ever more despots to spread fear globally. As Freedom House argues, stopping them will require the re-assertion of international norms and the punishment of the worst offenders.