

No Safe Haven: Algeria's Transnational Repression Of Dissidents

Amna Guellali December 17, 2024

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For Algerian activists, journalists and human rights defenders, physical borders no longer offer any sanctuary. The growing use of transnational repression by Algeria is a stark example of how authoritarian regimes are going global in their reach. As documented in the [latest report](#) by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, this systematic campaign beyond Algeria's borders not only threatens individual freedoms but also poses profound challenges to global human rights norms. Countries that are supposedly safe havens for free expression are increasingly becoming battlegrounds for authoritarian regimes and their security apparatuses. While transnational repression is not new, it has now reached unprecedented levels, often enabled by the complicity or acquiescence of host countries.

The popular Hirak protest movement, which erupted in Algeria in 2019 to demand democratic change in a country long dominated by an oligarchic system monopolizing power and economic wealth, briefly revived hopes for political reform. However, by 2020, the Algerian authorities had [crushed the movement](#), shutting down all avenues

for dissent within the country's borders. Refusing to stop at erasing the Hirak, the Algerian regime then launched a new phase of repression in 2021, extending its reach abroad.

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Examples abound of this campaign to suppress dissent outside Algeria's borders. Slimane Bouhafs, a Christian convert and Amazigh activist, was abducted from Tunisia in 2021, where he was under protection as a refugee registered with the United Nations refugee agency. From his refuge in Tunisia, he often expressed himself on social media, criticizing the Algerian authorities for their repression. His forcible return to Algeria, probably with the complicity of Tunisian authorities, led to his torture and a politically motivated trial that epitomized the regime's policy of persecuting dissenters wherever they are.

Similarly, whistleblowers and former military officers Mohamed Benhlima and Mohamed Abdallah, who sought asylum in Spain, were deported in 2022 by Spanish authorities despite credible risks of torture upon their return to Algeria. In their cases, Spain's complicity in enabling Algeria's repressive reach is a glaring example of the lack of protection that dissenters and activists could face in their host countries, including Western democracies that claim to uphold human rights.

These tactics extend beyond direct abductions and extraditions. Families of activists in the vast Algerian diaspora face relentless harassment. Amira Bouraoui, a prominent activist in Algeria who was among the first figures to call for an end to the regime in

2014, when she helped lead a protest movement against then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fourth term, fled to France in 2023 to escape unjust imprisonment. In retaliation, her relatives were arrested and interrogated. Abdou Semmar, a journalist who was sentenced to death in 2022 for his work, has been unable to reunite with his children who remain in Algeria, as the authorities have prevented them from travelling to France to stay with their father.

Algeria's approach to its dissidents abroad involves ensnaring them in a web of repression that includes a broad system of surveillance, monitoring of social media and outright intimidation by exerting pressure on their families who remain in the country. These methods reveal an emboldened authoritarianism with a clear message: There is no place on earth the regime cannot reach, no critic beyond its grasp.

Many of those interviewed by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies were unaware that they were even being closely monitored by Algerian authorities while abroad. They protested among the Hirak crowds in the diaspora, or wrote on social media from the safety of democratic states, believing they would be shielded by the protection of free speech in those countries. They used online platforms to expose the regime's harsh repression of the Hirak movement within Algeria and to express solidarity with political prisoners. Yet as soon as they set foot back in the country, the regime's repressive machinery swiftly closed in on them. They were arrested, prosecuted and silenced.

The implications are dire—a world where authoritarian regimes can act with impunity both within their borders and beyond, undermining international human rights norms and the very foundation of democratic freedoms in other countries.

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Algeria's actions are not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader **trend** of authoritarian regimes from **China** to **Russia** and **Rwanda** to **Egypt** extending their repression beyond their borders. When dissent is effectively silenced domestically, these regimes inevitably turn their gaze outward, targeting exiled critics to ensure that none are left unscathed.

This continuum of repression, inside and outside a country's borders, serves a dual purpose. Domestically, it reinforces a regime's grip on power, sending a stark warning to its citizens that the authorities can still find them, no matter where they are in the world. Internationally, it is a bold, often brazen demonstration of absolute power, aimed not only at dissidents but also at host countries, challenging their ability to provide sanctuary to refugees and asylum-seekers and exposing the fragility of international protections for human rights. The message it sends undermines the principle of asylum itself, casting doubt on the capacity of seemingly democratic states to shield individuals from the reach of authoritarian states.

The implications are dire—a world where authoritarian regimes can act with impunity both within their borders and beyond, undermining international human rights norms and the very foundation of democratic freedoms in other countries. While these principles have been shaken and weakened recently by the double standards of democracies like the United States and many European countries that have supported or acquiesced to Israel's plausible genocide in Gaza, along with egregious human rights violations in other places, transnational repression further erodes what remains of the international legal order, leaving it more vulnerable to the nefarious actions of dictatorial regimes.

At the same time, Algeria has recently been seen internationally as a champion of Palestinian rights, by positioning itself prominently on the U.N. Security Council by proposing Gaza cease-fire resolutions. However commendable, those diplomatic efforts must not shield its dismal human rights record and repressive policies, both at home and abroad. Genuine international leadership requires consistency in upholding justice and human dignity. Algeria's transnational repression undermines its claims to uphold anyone's rights, including Palestinians. To actually contribute to peace and stability,

Algeria must end its repressive practices at home and abroad, fostering genuine respect for fundamental freedoms.

ALGERIAN SECURITY FORCES SURROUND PROTESTERS DURING AN ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATION IN ALGIERS, DECEMBER 11, 2019. (PHOTO BY RYAD KRAMDI/AFP)

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