Government-sponsored repression launched across borders leaves democracies struggling to respond – Coda Story

By Rebekah Robinson
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There was a time when dissidents or independent journalists could find safety across national borders when faced with persecution by state agents. But exile is not what it used to be, and authoritarian governments are not deterred in the same ways they once were. What was once a brazen act, like attacking a dissident living in a faraway country, has become commonplace. And the tools available to repressive governments have been transformed to include tactics like deportation, surveillance, abuse of multilateral institutions, detention, or digital harassment.
An umbrella term has emerged to describe how governments are locating their citizens across national borders: “transnational repression.” In a recent example in the United States, as a federal indictment outlined, the government of Iran targeted Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad, coercing her relatives and using surveillance tactics to attempt to kidnap and transport her to a country that would cooperate with her extradition to Iran.

In another recent case, a U.S. citizen was arrested on charges of spying on Uyghur and Tibetan activists with the aim of silencing their criticism of the Chinese government. Transnational repression has been especially trained on Uyghurs and journalists.

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