



### [American Allies in the Middle East have been Targeting Dissidents Living in the United States](#)

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been accused of targeting dissidents and human rights activists on US soil using a range of tactics, including physical surveillance, hostage-taking, and prosecutions. These allegations were made in a recent report by the Freedom Initiative, a non-profit rights group founded by Egyptian American campaigner Mohamed Soltan. According to the report, both Cairo and Riyadh have become more innovative and emboldened in carrying out transnational repression, which refers to the targeting of opponents overseas. The organization surveyed 72 people for its report, many of whom are American citizens and are part of the Egyptian and Saudi diasporas. The results paint a picture of the two governments' attempts to intimidate critics and dissidents in the United States.

The report's findings are deeply concerning, especially considering that these countries are U.S. allies. While American politicians frequently express outrage and impose sanctions in response to such tactics used by rivals like China, Iran, and Russia, policymakers have not effectively held Saudi Arabia and Egypt to account, including for actions that are illegal under U.S. law and pose a threat to national security. It's worth noting that this is not the first time that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been accused of such behavior. In 2018, Saudi dissident and contributing columnist to the Washington Post Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered and dismembered inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. The CIA concluded that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was behind the murder, and the Treasury Department levied sanctions on 17 persons it said were engaged under President Donald Trump. However, the report shows that even under the glare of more attention, authoritarian regimes continue to use novel tactics and become emboldened in how they're carrying out transnational repression. In the case of Egypt, human rights activists and graduate students in Washington claimed that Egyptian operatives have been watching them at eateries and public gatherings. Some respondents said they had been turned down for consular assistance by the Egyptian Embassy. Death threats have been made to several, occasionally by calls posing as Egyptian security personnel.

Egypt has also tried human rights defenders and dissidents in absentia, making it impossible for its American residents to go back home. Additionally, the United Nations declared arbitrarily detained individuals Hossam Khalaf and Salah Soltan, who is the father of Mohamed Soltan, are still being held in prison in Egypt, according to the report. It is forbidden for at least two Americans to leave Egypt. In response to criticism of the administration, officials have "repeatedly" jailed relatives of those who reside abroad. Similar tactics have been used by Saudi Arabia, with American individuals being unjustly arrested or given travel restrictions. Eight respondents stated that members of their family had either been imprisoned by Saudi officials or had vanished. Five people reported receiving threatening phone calls or text messages, and four said they had been physically followed while in the US. The director of the Freedom Initiative, Abdullah Alaoudh, claimed he frequently receives death threats on social media from people he believes are working for the Saudi government. In an interview with The Washington Post, Alaoudh said, "I don't think they are joking at all," especially since "they just got away with

murder" in the case of Khashoggi. The situation is deeply concerning, especially given the lack of accountability on the part of the U.S. government. In response to Egypt's and Saudi Arabia's suppression of dissidents both domestically and internationally, the United States has not significantly altered its policies toward either country. Even after the murder of Khashoggi, Trump continued to have tight connections with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed and Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi. The Biden administration has taken some steps to distance itself from the Saudi government, but it remains to be seen whether this will translate into meaningful action against transnational repression.

A likely reason for the lack of action against these U.S. allies is the importance of the economic and strategic relationships between these countries. Saudi Arabia is a significant oil producer, and Egypt plays a crucial role in regional security and stability. Nevertheless, human rights should not be sacrificed for the sake of geopolitical interests. Furthermore, transnational repression not only violates human rights but also poses a threat to national security. If foreign governments are allowed to operate with impunity on U.S. soil, it could create a chilling effect on free speech and the ability of Americans to speak out against repression and human rights abuses abroad. It could also embolden other governments to engage in similar behavior. The United States must hold its allies to the same standards it holds its rivals, and not allow authoritarian regimes to operate with impunity on U.S. soil. This can be done through a combination of sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and support for civil society organizations that work to promote human rights and democracy in these countries. The U.S. government needs to take a strong stance against transnational repression, both to protect the rights of its citizens and to promote global democracy and stability.