Citizen Lab Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders on the Challenges Faced by Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) Working in Conflict, Post-conflict or Crisis-Affected Settings

May 22, 2023

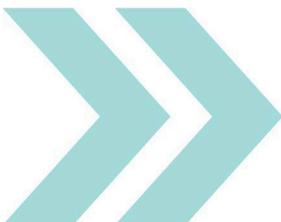**For all inquiries related to this submission, please contact:**

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I.   Introduction

The Citizen Lab is an interdisciplinary laboratory based at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto, focusing on research, development, and high-level strategic policy and legal engagement at the intersection of information and communication technologies, human rights, and global security.

The Citizen Lab welcomes the opportunity to submit an input to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders regarding the challenges faced by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) who live in exile or in the diaspora, and the threats they encounter. This submission is a contribution to growing academic and civil society work on transnational repression (TR), digital transnational repression (DTR), and the targeting of WHRDs who have fled or left conflict, post-conflict, or crisis-affected contexts and now live in the diaspora or in exile.
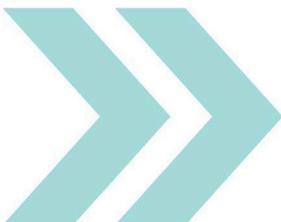
DTR has been a focus of Citizen Lab research for many years.[1] Since 2018, we have been undertaking systematic research, primarily through semi-structured interviews, with research participants living in exile in host states like Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, United States, Germany, and Denmark and originating from different countries, including Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Rwanda. These interviews have sought to understand how countries of origin use digital technologies to target activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and other regime critics in exile, as well as the impact of such targeting. Many of these participants are human rights defenders (HRDs) who originate from conflict, post-conflict, or crisis-affected settings.

II.   Defining Transnational Repression and Digital Transnational Repression

Transnational Repression (TR) is defined as the use of different methods by states to silence or stifle dissent by nationals living abroad or in exile.[2] This includes but is not limited to, physical forms of TR, such as harassment, assault, renditions, extradition requests, and passport cancellations, as well as **Digital Transnational Repression**

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[1] See, for example, The Citizen Lab, "Communities@Risk," *The Citizen Lab*, 2014, https://targetedthreats.net/.

[2] Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression," *Freedom House*, February 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Complete_FH_TransnationalRepressionReport2021_rev020221.pdf.

(DTR).[3] DTR arises where states use digital technologies to perpetrate acts of TR.[4] DTR may be undertaken through disinformation campaigns on social media platforms, through the deployment of intrusive surveillance tools (such as spyware), or other forms of online account manipulation and unauthorized access.[5]

Digital technologies have increased the scale and intensity of TR, with online spaces becoming an environment in which WHRDs in exile or in the diaspora are targeted, harassed, and silenced by their countries of origin. For the most part, host state law enforcement and other government institutions fail to understand the scale of the issue, and responses have been insufficient.[6]

Digital targeting and online threats lead to multiple human rights violations, including the rights to privacy, freedom of expression, and peaceful assembly. Such digital attacks can facilitate other methods of TR in the host state and in the country of origin, including physical harassment and threats, the arrest and torture of family members or colleagues back home (coercion-by-proxy)[7], extraditions, and enforced disappearances.
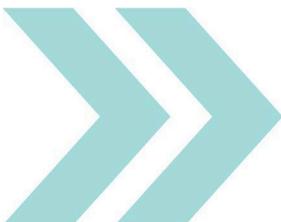
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[3] Yana Gorokhovskaia and Isabel Linzer, "Defending Democracy in Exile," *Freedom House*, June 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Complete_TransnationalRepressionReport2022_NEW_0.pdf.

[4] Noura Aljizawi and Siena Anstis, "The Effects of Digital Transnational Repression and the Responsibility of Host States," *Lawfare*, May 27, 2022, https://www.lawfareblog.com/effects-digital-transnational-repression-and-responsibility-host-states.

[5] For further insight into the tools of DTR, see Noura Al-Jizawi, Siena Anstis, Sophie Barnett, Sharly Chan, Niamh Leonard, Adam Senft, and Ron Deibert, "Psychological and Emotional War: Digital Transnational Repression in Canada," *Citizen Lab*, March 1, 2022, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/120575/1/Report%23151--dtr_022822_lowres.pdf.

[6] *Ibid* at 25.

[7] Fiona B. Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas, "At Home and Abroad: Coercion-by-Proxy as a Tool of Transnational Repression," *Freedom House*, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/home-and-abroad-coercion-proxy-tool-transnational-repression.

III. The Negative Impacts of DTR on Activists in the Diaspora or in Exile

The effects of DTR and TR on exiled activists are severe and far-reaching. Many research participants reported experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), paranoia, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues affecting their physical well-being. Participants highlighted difficulties in focusing on their studies or work, as well as financial impacts resulting from smear campaigns and disinformation, such as job loss or unemployment. Self-censorship, both online and offline, has emerged as a particularly concerning issue affecting participants' personal and professional lives. Further, social isolation is a common experience, as many participants reported avoiding socialization with people from their country of origin out of fear of being targeted by regime informants or for the safety of those associated with them.[8] Several participants said they refrained from traveling to countries where they believed they might be forcibly disappeared or extradited to their country of origin.
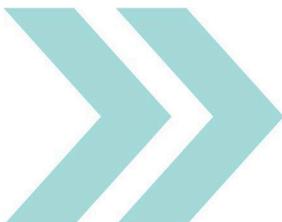
For example, Siba, a WHRD from the Middle East exiled in the European Union (EU), described how people from her country of origin started cutting ties with her after she became the target of disinformation campaigns and spyware. She identified a parallel between the situation in her host state and the circumstances she encountered in her country of origin after her release from prison. In both, she experienced social isolation as her contacts feared potential retaliation from the regime and did not want to communicate with her.[9]

Amanda, a WHRD from Central Africa, explained how disinformation campaigns on social media by her country of origin have not only isolated her online but also deterred people from supporting her advocacy.[10] Sana, a Middle Eastern WHRD experienced hacking attempts on her Email and social media accounts and had photoshopped nude

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[8] *Ibid* at 15.
[9] Siba (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, August 17, 2022.
[10] Amanda (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, September 7, 2022.

pictures of her sent to her contacts by what she suspects is a pro-regime electronic army.[11] As a result, her family begged her "to stop doing this work."[12]

Many research participants expressed difficulty in securing employment, which they believe was related to DTR. Farah, a WHRD from the Middle East, has been struggling for years to find employment, believing that the online smear campaigns that spread false information about her ultimately made her unhirable.[13] Moreover, we found that, even when WHRDs become victims of DTR due to their work, some employers abandon them without legal or institutional support.

IV.   The Gender-Based Dimensions of DTR

The attacks faced by exiled WHRDs are characterized by gender-based discrimination. WHRDs are subject to DTR that specifically targets their gender identity and sexuality. These threats include sexual comments, rape threats, doxxing, and the creation of fake nude pictures. Misogynistic and gender-based harassment have also been used to discredit WHRDs and undermine their professional reputation as human rights defenders, activists, or journalists. Such targeting leads to social isolation, which is particularly severe for WHRDs from social or cultural backgrounds in which social norms and stereotypes may already severely restrict transnational advocacy work.

For example, Maya, a WHRD from East Asia living in Canada, recounted the experience of being inundated with a barrage of text messages and online communications from real and fake accounts. These messages were filled with explicit death threats and descriptions outlining how she would be raped.[14]
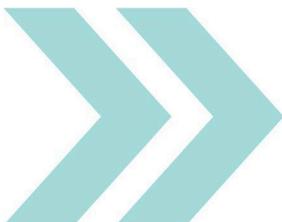
Lu, a journalist from China, explained how her picture, address, phone number, and email were published online along with other details about her personal life and her

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[11] Luke Harding and Charles Arthur, "Syrian Electronic Army: Assad's cyber warriors," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/apr/29/hacking-guardian-syria-background
[12] Sana (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, December 11, 2021.
[13] Farah (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, February 15, 2023.
[14] Maya (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, December 7, 2021.

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family. As a result of this doxxing, she was targeted with a high volume of online and offline attacks. Such attacks occurred in times of significant events, such as high-level conferences, media appearances, and meetings with UN officials, where she spoke out about human rights abuses in her country of origin.[15] Amanda experienced similar types of online sexual harassment. Among other incidents, a fake pornographic photoshopped picture of her was used by state-backed accounts on Twitter and was included in replies to her advocacy posts and to other users' posts that were expressing solidarity with her.[16]

DTR may also rely on other facets of WHRDs' identity, such as sexual orientation, political beliefs, religion, profession, or class. One tactic mentioned by several research participants was an attempt to frame WHRDs as 'traitors.' For example, Dunia, a WHRD from the Middle East exiled in Europe, was accused of associating with Israeli agents and was labeled a betrayer by state-related social media accounts, among others. This labeling made it impossible for Dunia to return to the Middle East, limiting her ability to engage in fieldwork, coordinate with other WHRDs, and see her family.[17]

Exiled WHRDs who advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights with respect to countries where there is persistent discrimination and criminalization against these groups face heightened online harassment and intimidation in the form of DTR. Dunia has encountered sexual-based online targeting and doxxing after addressing queer women's experiences. These threats, including online and offline death threats, have had chilling effects on her work, leading her to write anonymously about gender and queer issues to avoid further digital attacks.[18] Jin and Huda, WHRDs from Asia and the Middle East, fear disclosing their queer identity online due to potential exploitation in state-backed disinformation campaigns.[19]
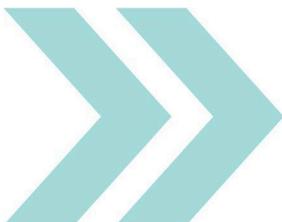
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[15] Lu (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, December 7, 2021.
[16] Amanda (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, September 7, 2022.
[17] Dunia (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, September 21, 2022.
[18] Dunia (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, September 21, 2022.
[19] Jin (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, September 22, 2022; Huda (pseudonym), interview by the Citizen Lab, October 5, 2022.

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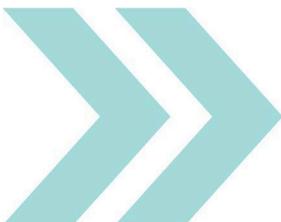
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V.   Recommendations

In light of the above-described findings, we set forth the following *non-exhaustive* recommendations:

Host States
- Adopt an official comprehensive definition of TR and DTR and make official statements against these practices.
- Establish dedicated agencies or mechanisms to address TR and DTR.
- Consider targeted sanctions against foreign states, individuals, and entities who engage in TR and DTR.
- Review state immunity laws and implement necessary changes to ensure victims of TR and DTR can pursue legal remedies.
- Review existing criminal laws to ensure accountability for TR and DTR and educate the public and law enforcement on these practices.
- Ensure that Interpol and other international organizations are not used by states to engage in TR.
- Ensure language-localized security resources and guides regarding TR and DTR and work closely with community and resettlement support organizations to understand needs.

The UN
- Develop and implement mechanisms to document and report on cases of TR and DTR at the international level, and encourage member states to address these issues and develop solutions to support targets.
- Establish accountability mechanisms to ensure that those responsible for TR and DTR are held to account and that victims have access to justice and adequate remedies.
- Establish dedicated mechanisms in the UN to address the threats of TR and DTR, including documenting this practice, providing support to victims,

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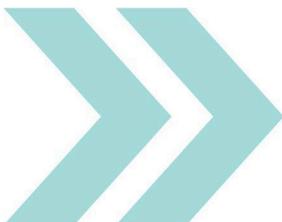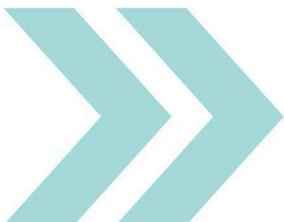undertaking investigations, and developing best practices for prevention and response.
- Strengthen international human rights law and the enforcement of existing treaties and conventions to address the specific challenges posed by TR and DTR.

Social media platforms
- Acknowledge DTR as an adversarial threat, and allocate adequate resources to defining, preventing, and mitigating it.
- Develop methods to identify incidents of TR and DTR, notify targets, and offer useful security resources and advice.
- Protect exiled WHRDs from DTR on platforms, such as through implementing specific policies addressing DTR, human content moderation, easy-to-access user support for WHRDs, and implementing high-security measures as a default setting.
- Consult and collaborate with affected communities to determine their local needs in responding to DTR. Employ and empower people with knowledge of language and context in conflict, post-conflict, and crisis-affected settings.

Civil Society
- Build and strengthen partnerships among civil society organizations, including human rights groups, exiled dissident communities, refugee support groups, and social justice advocates, to collectively address TR and DTR.
- Advocate for the inclusion of TR and DTR as human rights issues in international forums and dialogues and develop partnerships with international organizations and governments to advance policy responses to TR and DTR.
- Increase public awareness about the risks of TR and the tactics used by authoritarian regimes, through media campaigns, public events, and educational initiatives.
- Push technology companies to develop tools and strategies to protect users from digital TR and to hold companies accountable for their actions.

Academics and Researchers
- Conduct research on DTR, including the tactics and technology used by authoritarian states, the impact on targeted individuals and groups, and the effectiveness of policy responses.
- Collaborate with civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and exiled dissidents to develop research questions and inform research design to better address the needs of affected communities.
- Provide policy recommendations to policymakers and promote the adoption of evidence-based policies to address DTR.

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