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Going after the family: Transnational repression and the proxy punishment of Middle Eastern diasporas

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Abstract

Diasporas play a critical role in home-country politics by supporting social, political, and economic change therein. Yet, regimes countermobilize against activists abroad by repressing their diasporas. This paper investigates a widespread but overlooked method in the transnational repression toolkit: that of 'proxy punishment', that is, the abuse of family members at home as a means to manipulate and subjugate dissidents abroad. Using 246 original interviews with diaspora activists from Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Libya, the analysis demonstrates that regimes deployed five tactics against diaspora members' non-activist families at home: harm and confinement, threats and harassment, forced participation in regime propaganda and slander, resource deprivation, and travel bans. We then identify the mechanisms shaping how diaspora members responded to this repertoire. The paper concludes with implications for research on transnational diaspora activism, globalized authoritarianism, and collective dimensions of the repression-dissent nexus.

KEYWORDS

diaspora, global social movements, transnational advocacy networks, transnational families, transnationalism

INTRODUCTION

Research over the past several decades has brought attention to diasporas as global actors who influence home-country affairs (Adamson, 2013, 2016; Brinkerhoff, 2009, 2016; Koinova, 2021; Shain, 2005; Smith & Stares, 2007; Vertovec, 2009), and exiles, émigrés, and emigrants who gain new rights and liberties in their countries-of-settlement have the potential to fuel socio-political change at home in a number of ways. By forming transnational advocacy networks dedicated to supporting victims of regime abuses, diaspora movements have the potential to threaten authoritarian rulers' legitimacy, stability, and even sovereignty (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Moss, 2022). Studies show that activists, journalists, and human rights defenders residing abroad can subvert regime censorship, expose abuses, fund local opposition groups, and pressure host-countries to intervene (Betts & Jones, 2016; Quinsa, 2019; Tarrow, 2005).

At the same time, diaspora activism is often a dangerous affair. Authoritarian regimes have long relied on 'transnational repression' to track and punish dissenters abroad through surveillance, harassment, and violence (Basar & Öztürk, 2020; Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017; Dalmasso et al., 2018; Furstenberg et al., 2021; Glasius, 2018a, 2018b; Jörum, 2015; Michaelsen, 2018; Moss, 2022; Tsourapas, 2021). From the 1940 murder of Leon Trotsky in Mexico City on Stalin's orders to the 2018 assassination of journalist and activist-in-exile Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul by Saudi agents, authoritarian rulers go to great lengths to silence their opponents abroad (Human Rights Council, 2019). A recent investigation by Freedom House (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021) demonstrates that 608 assaults, assassinations, detentions, and renditions were committed against émigrés in 79 host-countries by 31 different governments between 2014 and 2020. This research also shows that, in light of the 'democracy recession' in the world today (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021), the deployment of violence against anti-regime diaspora members is on the rise.

At the same time, regimes do not necessarily need to reach across borders in order to subjugate their opponents in other states. Instead, they also rely on 'proxy punishment',¹ repressing diaspora members' *non-activist relatives and contacts in the home-country* as a means to silence, undermine, and punish dissenters abroad. For example, after Abdul Rahman Al-Saleh, a member of the Syrian opposition-in-exile in Germany, accused the Assad regime of corruption on *Al-Jazeera* in 2020, regime forces arrested his family in Syria, adding them to the growing list of detained and disappeared relatives of opponents abroad (New Arab, 2020). Research published over the past five years notes that a range of regimes from the Middle Eastern region, Asia, and Africa are actively exploiting transnational family ties to exert control among their populations abroad (Amnesty International, 2017, 2020; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020; Hirt & Mohamed, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2019a, 2019b; Lemon, 2019; Lemon et al., 2017). Despite the importance of this phenomenon, however, the forms and effects of proxy punishment remain curiously understudied.

To fill this gap, this paper addresses how authoritarian regimes use proxy punishment to exert extraterritorial control over their diasporas and the mechanisms that shape activists' strategic adaptations. While this paper is not the first study to *acknowledge* proxy punishment (Moss, 2016) or 'coercion-by-proxy' (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020), it is the first to systematically *unpack* this transnational repertoire and to *theorize* its effects on diaspora dissidents. By analysing original data on Syrian, Iranian, Egyptian, and Libyan diaspora activism, we first identify the repertoire of proxy punishment wielded against dissidents. Second, we show how diaspora activists' responses to these multifaceted threats were driven by the respective weight of their (a) *commitments to politicized, principle-driven action* and their (b) *host-country social capital*. Strong commitment made diaspora members *willing* to challenge regimes despite the costs, while social capital helped to *offset* those costs. In other words, political commitment provided the 'will' to undertake high-risk activism, while social capital provided the 'way', that is, the means, to support activists and their families. In contrast, those with weak commitment and a lack of social capital felt compelled to adopt a strategy of *going silent* out of fear for their families. We also find that *strong commitment* combined with *weak social capital* motivated activists to navigate between protective and principled action. As we explain below, navigation strategies enabled individuals to remain active, but also forced them to cut their transnational ties and self-censor their advocacy. We conclude with theoretical implications for studies of transnational networks, authoritarianism in a globalized world, and state repression.

THEORIZING PROXY PUNISHMENT IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZED AUTHORITARIANISM

In an era of accelerated globalization, diasporas frequently mobilize across state borders to promote change from afar. Benefitting from internet-facilitated connectivity, rapid information flows, cheap cross-border travel, and the international human rights regime (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), diaspora activists foment international pressure against repressive rulers, undermine authoritarian censorship, and channel support to their allies at home (e.g., Adamson, 2002; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Shain & Barth, 2003; Tarrow, 2005). These entrepreneurs build on their ‘in-between-advantage’ (Brinkerhoff, 2016) as outsiders with access to international powerholders and insiders with homeland contacts, loyalties, and language skills (Ayoub, 2016). Accordingly, diasporas can broker between social worlds, becoming transnational players in conflicts between authoritarian regimes and domestic opponents.

Yet, it is precisely because of activists’ potential to challenge authoritarian rulers that diasporas are subjected to the ‘long arm’ of authoritarian states (Tsourapas, 2020). Regimes counter-mobilize against dissidents abroad through transnational repression, which includes surveillance, threats, and the use of violence (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Michaelsen, 2020; Moss, 2016; Öztürk & Tas, 2020). From Napoleonic France to fascist Italy and the Soviet Union, illiberal regimes have long tracked and assassinated their opponents overseas (Shain, 2005). However, transnational repression has since evolved significantly in scope and intensity along with technological changes, global connectivity, and entangled security practices (Adamson & Greenhill, 2021; Murakami Wood, 2012). Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, regional alliances and security cooperation agreements between states have facilitated the capture of lawful dissidents in the name of so-called war on terror. Regimes exploit the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), using it to unlawfully apprehend and extradite political opponents, asylum seekers, and refugees (Cooley, 2015; Lemon, 2019; de Goede & Sullivan, 2015). The proliferation of surveillance technology has further stimulated these practices. Largely unrestrained by export controls and independent oversight, opaque private industries furnish regimes with spyware, such as the Israeli NSO Group’s Pegasus surveillance tool, which penetrates smartphones to track activists like Jamal Khashoggi and eavesdrop on their communications (Bergman & Kingsley, 2021; Deibert, 2020).

Proxy punishment is an important, but distinct, method in the transnational toolkit. Rather than relying on the extraterritorial application of violence, this method applies violence *within* regimes’ territorial jurisdictions as an indirect means to coerce the diaspora. By directing repression towards diaspora members’ close contacts—most often their family members—at home, regimes use proxy punishment to indirectly punish those who remain out of reach. Doing so is far cheaper than attempting to reach activists who are protected by the institutions and security apparatuses of other states. Keeping violence within the borders of a regimes’ sovereign territories also makes it easier for state actors to avoid international condemnation and sanctions, as were incurred by the Saudi monarchy after the 2018 killing of Khashoggi in Turkey.

Today, proxy punishment reflects both newer and enduring styles of authoritarian repression. While exemplifying the age-old practice of collective retribution on the one hand, proxy punishment signifies the adaptation and extension of domestic repression into the contemporary, transnational arena of contentious politics (Tarrow, 2005). Newer technologies enable regimes to monitor and surveil diaspora communities with relative ease. It is through this diaspora activists’ efforts to publicly ‘name and shame’ regimes on internet-based platforms and through their communications with colleagues and contacts that regimes become alerted to the identities, whereabouts, and actions of their opponents. While this practice occurred well before the rise of commercial air travel, cheap phone calls (Vertovec, 2004), or the internet and social media, it is these fruits of globalization that make proxy punishment ever easier and swifter to deploy against civilians in sending states.

At the same time, this method reflects a longstanding feature of dictatorships (Alexopoulos, 2008; Moore, 1978), namely, the ‘simple and ingenious device of “guilt by association” to render a population susceptible to manipulation and subjugation (Arendt, 1979, p. 323). In societies conditioned by surveillance and fear, subjects tend to avoid

discussing politics even within the intimacy of their homes, as one person's crossing of the 'red lines' can endanger their families and implicate their entire social network in traitorous, illegal behaviours (Cohen & Arato, 1994, p. 49; Pearlman, 2016; Wedeen, 1999). By suppressing 'horizontal voice', regimes suppress the social relations that nourish trust, alternative ideas, identities, and collective resistance (O'Donnell, 1986, p. 7).

Because transnational repression extends 'the scale of domestic political controls into transnational spaces' (Lewis, 2015, p. 141), the more repressive a regime acts towards their population at home (or against a particular political or ethnic group), the more likely state officials will be to deploy proxy punishment. Changes in the use of proxy punishment are also likely to correlate with fluctuations in regime strength. For instance, as Turkey became increasingly authoritarian under its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the government increased its reliance on proxy punishment as a means to repress exiles (Popp & Sandberg, 2019). 'Softer' authoritarian regimes may be less inclined to use this method when their power and longevity rests on 'pillars of stability' other than force and personalistic rule (Gerschewski, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2010). We therefore expect proxy punishment to be more commonly wielded by highly repressive regimes than semi-authoritarian states or weak democracies.² That said, proxy punishment can take the form of covert intimidations, such as calls by anonymous regime agents that threaten diasporas' relatives at home (Amnesty International, 2020). Accordingly, any illiberal government hoping to cultivate legitimacy, investment, and donor support may use proxy punishment to silence international criticism and bolster their image (Dukalskis, 2021).

A diaspora community's host-country will also shape their vulnerability to proxy punishment in direct and indirect ways. While not a prerequisite for diaspora activism, residing in a democracy endows emigrants with a significant degree of political freedoms, access to independent media and advocacy organizations, and political support to leverage against dictatorships. Paradoxically, however, the freer and safer diaspora activists are abroad, the more likely they may be to mobilize against regimes, and the more likely regimes may be to subsequently use proxy punishment against diasporas and their families. Host-country governments cannot prevent acts of repression inside a regime's sovereign territory, although some governments and international institutions have condemned proxy punishment. In 2019, the European Parliament denounced China's harassment of Uyghurs abroad, for instance, which forces 'them to act as informants against other Uyghurs, return to Xinjiang or remain silent about the situation there, sometimes by detaining their family members' (Amnesty International, 2020). However, such resolutions often lack mechanisms for enforcement and accountability. As a result, reports suggest that diasporas in democracies remain highly vulnerable to proxy punishment, and that instances of threats against families remain underreported (Phipps, 2020; Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021).

Given the far-reaching consequences of proxy punishment for diaspora communities and their families in the home-country, understanding this form of transnational repression is a pressing topic. Despite the growing acknowledgment of this practice, however, we lack systematic research on its forms and the effects it has on transnational activism. Our study addresses this gap using original evidence from four Middle Eastern diasporas. Doing so advances theories of transnational activism and repression by demonstrating the types and consequences of high-risk mobilization for diasporas who—by virtual of their cross-border network ties—remain embedded in two worlds at once, and face collective risks and costs for speaking out (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

DATA AND METHODS

This paper draws on data collected for separate but related research projects. Evidence from the first author comes from a comparative study undertaken between 2011 and 2014 to investigate when and how Libyan and Syrian diaspora members mobilized to support the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings from the United States and Great Britain. The second author gathered original data on the methods, mechanisms, and effects of transnational repression against exiled activists from Iran, Syria, and Egypt. This project involved more than 60 interviews conducted in 2015, 2018, and 2019, with respondents residing in 12 host-countries across Europe, North America, Turkey, and Tunisia. Evidence from the third author comes from interviews on activism and repression among Egyptian exiles conducted in 2018 and 2019

with 40 individuals residing in the United Kingdom and Turkey. These projects produced a total of 246 original in-depth interviews with diaspora activists, including respondents who became active over the course of their residence abroad and those who were forced abroad because of their activism. (For more information on the data and analytical procedures, see Michaelsen (2018, 2020), Moss (2022), and Kennedy, [2017].

These data are ideally suited to shedding light on proxy punishment for several reasons. The home-countries examined here—Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Libya—have each experienced prolonged periods of authoritarian rule with severe restrictions on expression and civil society. Together, the interviews cover periods of stable authoritarian rule and heightened unrest, including the 2009 Green movement protests in Iran and the Arab Spring uprisings, which gave diaspora activists new opportunities and motivations to mobilize for home-country change in 2011 and beyond (Kelly, 2011). In Egypt and Iran, short-lived openings were followed by a repressive backlash that re-imposed authoritarian control. In Syria, the 2011 uprising led the regime to declare war on its population, and following the 2011 Libyan revolution, a brief period of democratization was followed by an internationalized civil war. These conditions pushed many to emigrate and join pre-existing diaspora communities (Dunne & Hamzawy, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2012).

After these studies were completed, we jointly examined our findings and found that respondents living in different host-countries faced the common threat of proxy punishment. Using our data, we co-constructed categories encompassing all reported forms of transnational repression involving in-country relatives who were not themselves active for politicized causes. Thus, their repression could not be construed as punishments for their own activism. We also cased secondary sources, including scholarly works, media articles, and human rights reports, to help us to refine and corroborate these categories. We then coded our original interviews for activists' responses and justifications, using process-tracing strategies to account for patterns in event sequences, strategic decision-making processes, and respondent characteristics (George & Bennett, 2004; Lofland et al., 2006). Using this inductive, grounded analytical approach (Charmaz, 2006), we derived a common repertoire of activists' responses and identified the mechanisms driving their decision-making.

The safety and security of our respondents remained a core concern, and the informed consent of interviewees followed institutionally mandated protocols (see the Appendix of Moss, 2022), including obtaining consent orally in some instances. The latter procedure is appropriate for researching communities vulnerable to retaliation by political authorities (Glasius et al., 2017, p. 100; European Commission, 2020). In order to account for the shifting realities of the Middle Eastern region and to provide maximum protection to our respondents, the majority of interviews cited in this paper are anonymized. Exceptions were made in cases where activists themselves had published on, and spoken publicly about, proxy punishment. We also give minimal descriptions of anonymized participants to facilitate their de-identification and protection.

EXPERIENCING PROXY PUNISHMENT

Proxy punishment was a common and predominant concern for interviewees from Syria, Egypt, Iran, and Libya alike. As a Libyan dissident recalled, if the Gaddafi regime 'knew you were opposing them and they can't reach you, they would target your family'. Similarly, a Syrian interviewee pointed out in 2019 that the Assad regime could detain families in Syria at any moment 'to use them as a pressure tool' against opponents abroad, emphasizing that this was 'the first nightmare for any activist'.

Our analysis finds that proxy punishment fell into five major categories. The first was the (1) *physical harm and confinement* of activists' relatives in the home-country. In 2011, for instance, regime agents kidnapped and beat musician Malik Jandali's parents in Homs after he spoke out in favour of liberty in Syria during a performance in Washington, DC (Amnesty International, 2011). In a parallel case, a Syrian activist reported from Turkey in 2018 that regime militia threatened his brother's life; although the brother succeeded in fleeing abroad, his colleague in Syria was subsequently tortured and killed by the same militia. Physical harm and confinement could also take the form of arrest, detention, and interrogation. An Egyptian human rights defender reported in 2018 that authorities 'sent my father messages,

called him and threatened him that he will pay for [my actions] Then they took him to the police station for two nights’.

Violence against family members was also used to try and lure diaspora activists back home. A Syrian journalist working in an exiled media organization in Turkey reported in 2018 that his brother and colleague were arrested ‘to get me back into the country.’ Two years later, the families were informed that both men had died in prison. Iranian authorities also used this tactic to target journalists working for Persian-language programs of foreign media, including BBC Persian and Radio Free Europe. An editor of one of these stations explained that authorities arrested his father in 2009 to send him ‘a message’ and lure him to Turkey or Dubai, where he might be kidnapped and renditioned home. In response,

I let [the Iranian authorities] know that they could contact me directly to tell me what they want ... [But] they never contacted me directly. The pressure increased: they also took my mother, my brother. They threatened them in different ways. They insisted that I stop working.

In 2017, 85 Iranian journalists working for BBC Persian—more than half of the staff—indicated in an internal survey that their family members in Iran had been interrogated because of their reporting. The sister of a BBC journalist was even held in solitary confinement for 17 days to force the journalist into a Skype-based interrogation with the authorities (Saremi, 2017). Several Iranian, Libyan, and Syrian respondents attested that relatives who visited them abroad were either interrogated upon their return or were pressured to spy on them before departing.

The second type of proxy punishment involved (2) *verbal threats and in-person harassment* of family members by regime agents. A Libyan dissident who fled his home-country in the early 1990s recalled, ‘My father was being harassed consistently while I was abroad ... about me’. Two Egyptian residents in Turkey working for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media organizations likewise stated that their families were threatened as a direct result of their media work. The ‘Egyptian national security guys went to my father many times, telling [him] they would kill him’, one of them reported. Egyptian security agents raided families’ homes, destroying or confiscating personal belongings such as laptops and smartphones (Human Rights Watch, 2019a). Syrian respondents explained that security agents often paid families a visit to gather information about their relative’s activism abroad. ‘Just their physical presence sends a strong signal’, explained one such activist. He pointed out that some families who were threatened this way decided to leave Syria ‘because they felt insecure and did not want to be in that position again’. In an especially tragic case, an Iranian journalist and human rights defender reported that because of his activities abroad, his brother in Tehran was harassed for years by intelligence agents and was eventually driven to suicide.

The third type was (3) *forced participation in regime propaganda and slander*. For instance, the Iranian regime pressured the husband of human rights lawyer and Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi to ‘confess’ on national television about his wife’s so-called involvement in an anti-Iranian Western conspiracy (Ebadi, 2016). The sister of women’s rights campaigner Masih Alinejad was likewise forced on primetime Iranian state television to criticize Alinejad’s activism and her Western lifestyle, and to claim that their parents disapproved of her campaigns (Alinejad, 2018). The father of Mohamed Ali, an exiled businessman who stirred protests with YouTube videos criticizing government corruption, was forced to appear on TV programs in Egypt denouncing his son (Human Rights Watch, 2019a). Egyptian policemen also ordered the brother of a Muslim Brotherhood activist in the United Kingdom to testify in the media that this activist was a terrorist.

The fourth type of proxy punishment was (4) *resource deprivation*. Resource deprivation included the termination of family members’ employment, the seizure of their assets, and the denial of work permits. An Iranian journalist explained that his brother was blocked from working in the media sector because of his family’s activism abroad. A Syrian activist recalled that state authorities also used routine bureaucratic requirements to put exiles’ relatives under pressure:

When you go to any public office to do paperwork, they will harass and question you: “What is your son, your relative doing outside?” If you give a vague answer, it will not be accepted; you have to give

a precise answer. And they could prevent you from [obtaining a] civil [or] commercial register because your relative is classified as a threat.

Similarly, in the case of an Egyptian activist, the state put pressure on him by preventing his family from obtaining national identity cards. This imposed numerous hardships on his relatives, including making it impossible for them to work legally.

The fifth and final type of proxy punishment that of (5) *travel bans* issued against relatives at home. As a Syrian dissident recalled in 2014, ‘when I left the country, the Assad government issued an arrest warrant for me ... and also issued a travel ban on all my family members—my mother, sisters, brothers’. A member of the Muslim Brotherhood’s executive branch in the United Kingdom attested that the Egyptian government blocked his family members from ‘traveling [to England] to my daughter’s wedding because of my work’ in 2018. The chief editor of a popular Iranian news media in Europe likewise explained that parents of his staff had been prevented from visiting their children abroad. Spouses of Iranian journalists in the diaspora have also had their passports confiscated by regime agents (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). By keeping transnational family groups apart, regimes effectively divided and strained activists’ ties in major ways.

Our analysis finds that these five tactics were not mutually exclusive. Respondents attested that their relatives were often subjected to multiple forms of proxy punishment at once, that different members of the same family sometimes faced different of repression, and that their immediate families might face a range of repressive actions within a condensed period of time. Furthermore, while some tactics appeared to be ‘one time’ punishments (such as denying relatives their national identity cards), this was not guaranteed. Respondents perceived that regimes and their agents might escalate their tactics quickly if they did not relent, but that the timing and severity of proxy punishment were also difficult to reliably predict. Interviewees’ responses were therefore not determined by the type of individual tactic deployed against individual relatives per se, owing to the multifaceted and often unpredictable nature of this repression. Rather, activists abroad responded to proxy punishment as a ‘set’, or repertoire, of actions that made dissent both high-risk and high-cost. As explained below, our analysis finds that interviewees’ responses were shaped by mechanisms that determined whether or not they possessed both the ‘will’ and the ‘way’ to act out against regimes in the face of these costs.

THE MECHANISMS SHAPING DIASPORA MEMBERS’ RESPONSES TO PROXY PUNISHMENT

Our inductive analysis finds that interviewees’ responses to proxy punishment were shaped by (1) the degree of their *commitment* to engaging in principled, politicized action, such as independent journalism, human rights work, and lobbying against regimes, and (2) their relative degree of *social capital* in the host-country. By social capital, we mean the social statuses and organizational affiliations that provided public, institutional, and political support for activism and civil society. These mechanisms shaped diaspora members’ responses to both the *perceived threat* of proxy punishment (i.e., the expectation of the sanction) and its *actual application* to their families in patterned ways. We categorized political commitment and social capital as ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ according to interviewees’ self-evaluations and reported resources. As summarized in Table 1, these mechanisms influenced respondents’ decisions to react by: (a) going silent, (b) fighting back, or (c) navigating between protective and principled action.

Going silent

Respondents reported ‘going silent’ after settling abroad when their *weak political commitment* to change at home was combined with *weak host-country social capital*. While interviewees feared for their own safety, they reported

TABLE 1 Mechanisms shaping diaspora activists' responses to proxy punishment

Commitment to political activism	Host-country social capital	Response
Weak	Weak	(1) Going silent
Strong	Strong	(2) Fighting back
Strong	Weak	(3) Navigating between principled and protective action by signalling, cutting ties, or self-censoring

that proxy punishment was the *primary* factor preventing them from voicing their opposition to home-country regimes. A Libyan-Canadian respondent, for instance, attested that her emigrant father forbade discussion of Gaddafi online or with her friends ‘in case it put his family back home in danger’. Prior to 2011, Syrians and Libyans confirmed that the presence of real and perceived regime informants in their communities and regime surveillance of their online activities pressured them to keep quiet for the same reason. A Syrian interviewee from Manchester recalled,

[Pro-regime Syrians] would take part in our community affairs and gala dinners, but we would never have the confidence or relaxation to speak in front of them *openly* about anything to do with the regime. For fear for ourselves, because we were going regularly back home, or for our family back home.

These respondents were not yet committed to anti-regime activism, so going silent was perceived as a necessary obligation and an obvious strategy to protect their families at home. Furthermore, these respondents did not report possessing any form of social capital that might have helped them to offset the costs of speaking out against regimes. While most of these individuals moved abroad to escape a lack of opportunities and freedom at home, they purposefully eschewed activities considered ‘political’ and ones that promoted free speech. In a self-reinforcing, cyclical fashion, their strategy to go silent isolated them from the kinds of social capital that could have provided support for anti-regime activism. Accordingly, they lacked both the ‘will’ and the ‘way’ to engage in high-cost activism and express their anti-regime sentiments.

During the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, egregious acts of violence by the regime against peaceful protesters led Syrian and Libyan respondents to change their responses (hence their inclusion in the sample of activists). Suddenly facing a situation in which their co-nationals were being imprisoned and slaughtered for demanding basic freedoms, interviewees were confronted with a new moral choice: either remain silent to protect their families—which came to be perceived as selfish—or become active on behalf of the broader cause for dignity and democracy for all. As events in the home-country increased their commitment to the anti-regime cause, this led respondents to transition from being silent to (b) openly fighting back, or (c) navigating these risks, as detailed below.

That said, because the Syrian revolution did not lead to the collapse of Bashar al-Assad’s government, the resurgence of regime control in Syria re-induced silence across the diaspora and refugee communities in the years following (Pearlman, 2016). The threat of proxy punishment also prevented Syrian refugees from providing testimony in Germany and Sweden about former regime officials’ crimes against humanity, thus further insulating the regime from international accountability for its brutality (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Respondents likewise described the moral dilemma and ‘huge pressure’ that Syrian activists have experienced as a result of recent threats and intimidations against their families. ‘I am free to express my opinion, but not if it causes harm to other people’, one respondent argued from his residence in Europe. ‘If it causes harm to me, I am responsible for myself. But I cannot be responsible for the harm on other people’. The threat of proxy punishment therefore has continued to deter many anti-regime Syrians from taking a stand as Assad and his allies reasserted their iron-fisted rule.

Fighting back

In contrast to the response of keeping silent, we find that interviewees with *strong political commitment* and *strong social capital* rebuffed the threats posed by proxy punishment in order to ‘fight back’ openly against regimes. Strong commitment was signified by their leadership and regular participation in anti-regime actions and transnational social movements, such as the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood or the Syrian opposition-in-exile. Others became independent opposition figures and anti-regime influencers on social media. For example, Abdullah el-Sherif, a popular YouTuber and critic-in-exile, had his brothers arrested by Egyptian authorities and thrown into a maximum-security prison under trumped-up charges for his critical commentary. Sherif’s father was also forced onto state TV to denounce his son. Nevertheless, Sherif remained committed to continuing his work, reasoning that the regime of Fattah el-Sisi could not be trusted to stop abusing his family. At the same time, Sherif’s social capital as an online celebrity and Sisi’s ‘loudest critic in exile’ (Walsh, 2020) helped him to garner support from outside organizations, including damning condemnation of his family’s plight from *The New York Times* and Human Rights Watch (2019a). While such capital did not lead to the cessation of proxy punishment, it did indirectly mitigate these costs for Sherif by making the Egyptian government’s repression an open subject of international controversy and scrutiny.

Some highly committed respondents fought back by openly challenging the threat of proxy punishment itself. One human rights defender, for instance, recalled how he had been incarcerated and tortured by the Sisi regime; this fuelled his commitment to anti-regime activism after being forced to leave Egypt. Upon resettling in Germany, his father was arrested and interrogated, and his family pressured him to cease his activities. This activist rebuffed their requests, vowing that he would use his connections to German parliamentarians and journalists—that is, his social capital—to ‘make everything public—and then they [the Egyptian authorities] would have problems with the Germans’. Although this strategy temporarily eased the regime’s pressure on his relatives, doing so was no guarantee of their safety in the long term. In this case, harassment and threats against his immediate family increased again after he participated in public events and meetings with European officials.

In addition to popular followings and political ties, social capital also stemmed from organizational support from media organizations. In 2017, for instance, the BBC filed an official complaint to the United Nations on behalf of its Iranian journalists over the regime’s harassment of them and their families. UN Secretary-General António Guterres subsequently expressed his concern over the persecution of BBC staff (BBC, 2019). Since then, the BBC and other UK-based Iranian media have repeatedly worked to raise public attention about transnational repression and help journalists resist proxy punishment. As one Iranian news editor in the United Kingdom explained, ‘For a while, it was tried to convince the regime in silence, behind closed doors, to stop the pressure on outside journalists. For instance, they sent letters to officials to ask them to prevent these measures’. Because this ‘closed door’ strategy had no effect, ‘it was decided to take this public in order to make them stop’.

At the same time, the editor conceded that media organizations did not ‘have a lot of means to convince the Iranian regime to refrain from this pressure and harassment’. Organizations therefore also focused on trying to reduce the costs of anti-regime work by providing psychological support and showing solidarity with their staff. Another Iranian editor based in Europe pointed out that colleagues affected by proxy punishment worked conscientiously to support one other. They came to understand ‘that if they step back, the pressure will not stop. The authorities will know that they have found the soft spot and will move forward step by step’. Activists without the backing of protective organizations, however, were left to handle these pressures on their own, making it far less likely that they would be able to withstand collective punishment and its attendant pressures over time.

Respondents who took the principled decision to continue their public activism despite the threat of proxy punishment did experience significant guilt and stress, however. An Iranian women’s rights defender pointed out that residing in a European country gave her the freedoms to be vocal in her claims, but ‘day by day, it puts your links inside the country in more danger’. This led some activists to question whether they should maintain their stance of fighting back. Abdullah el-Sherif, mentioned above, expressed these events as ‘painful’ and experienced a deep internal conflict, as

well as pressure from his parents. 'I feel *really* bad', he said. 'I've lost my appetite. My mother and father call all the time, crying on the phone, asking me to quit. I don't know what to do' (Walsh, 2020). Families could release diaspora members from some of this guilt by giving them permission to speak out against regimes. Without this permission, however, respondents risked incurring anger, social sanctions, and isolation from their relatives (see also Moss, 2016). In either case, the pressures that the threats of proxy punishment imposed on diaspora activists were traumatizing and pervasive. It is for this reason that many interviewees took a third route, treading a narrow path between principled *and* protective action.

Navigating between protective and principled action

Interviewees attempted a third route of *navigating* between the opposing options of going silent and fighting back when they possessed a *strong commitment* to their principles, but also had *weak social capital*. While our sample is not statistically representative, the fact that most of our 246 interviewees chose navigating as a strategic response illustrates the dilemma faced by exiles and emigrants with 'a foot in two worlds' (Levitt, 2003). In other words, they become torn between their duty to protect their families and their principled, political obligations to support anti-authoritarian causes.

We find that navigation strategies took three primary forms: *signalling* to regimes that activists cut their family ties in order to persuade them of proxy punishment's futility (while clandestinely retaining these ties); actually *cutting ties* as a means to protect their relatives; and *self-censoring* their public visibility while remaining active behind the scenes. Respondents sometimes combined signalling or cutting ties with self-censorship. At the same time, these tactics could not ensure the safety of their families. Furthermore, activists often felt unsure about the margin of error when attempting to navigate between their opposing obligations. Many decided to adopt strategies of risk mitigation in an improvised manner, depending on whether they had been threatened directly, received new information about regime reprisals or policies, heard rumours about impending regime plans, and observed the costs paid by their peers.

In cases of *signalling*, respondents attempted to derive a work-around strategy to proxy punishment by signalling to regime monitors that they were estranged from their families. An Iranian editor of a prominent news organization, for instance, spoke loudly and rudely to his father on the phone, *pretending* to be angry with him in order to 'speak' to agents tapping the line. 'I told my father that my work was none of his business and he could not interfere', he attested, in order 'to let [the security agents] know that they couldn't get to me through my father. To some extent it helped. My father [also] told them that ... he had told me to stop my work but I wouldn't listen'. In this way, activists tried to persuade regime agents that proxy punishment was a futile strategy. This also worked the other way around, as when a Syrian activist's father called him and told him angrily to stop his advocacy. 'I know he doesn't mean it', the interviewee affirmed; rather, his father was attempting to convince security agents to leave him alone after facing continuous harassment for his son's activities in London. Even if activists and their families did not truly 'mean' what they said, they had to keep their communications hostile or exceedingly limited in order to maintain the ruse over time.

It follows that the strategy of navigation also prompted some respondents to actually *cut their ties* and cease communicating with relatives at home as a strategy of familial protection. Libyans and Syrians reported that before and during the 2011 uprisings, this strategy gave their relatives plausible deniability if they were questioned by authorities. A Syrian activist interviewed in 2019 explained that when his family was threatened by security agents because of his Facebook postings, he decided to 'block all the family on Facebook' to protect them. Others ceased contacting their families at all, as in the case of a Syrian journalist who escaped to Europe in 2018. 'My family is still in Damascus, [but] until now I haven't sent them a direct message', he said. 'I sent a message through my aunt in Saudi Arabia. She tells me every week what my family is doing. I am still afraid to contact them'.

Respondents also navigated these pressures by *self-censoring their visibility*. As mentioned above, some respondents who had been silent previously became motivated to mobilize in solidarity with their compatriots at home after the onset of the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions. At the same time, interviewees attempted to reduce the risks to their

families by mobilizing anonymously, or by carefully selecting the venues in which they would reveal their identities. A British-Libyan doctor-turned-organizer attested that ‘*Al-Jazeera* initially wanted me to come on TV and speak, and I was like no, I can’t. I have family in Libya and if they show my face and my name that’s it, they will be rounded up’. He instead worked behind the scenes to amass humanitarian aid without associating his name with the revolution. Others concealed their identities during protests by covering their faces. In London, respondents attested that they did so initially because ‘I had family in Libya’ and officials inside the embassy ‘were filming people protesting’. This surveillance also occurred outside of Syrian embassies in 2011 (Amnesty International, 2011), and Syrians who protested publicly in person or online without permission from their parents were chastised for being careless with their relatives’ safety.

Some activists shifted into self-censorship after repression at home increased. For example, in 2018, Egypt’s parliament passed legislation giving the state new powers to regulate social media accounts, resulting in intensified monitoring of social media at home and abroad (Amnesty International, 2018). UK-based activists also reported receiving anonymous messages on Facebook threatening consequences for their families if they did not cease their criticisms. As a result of these increased threats, one Muslim Brotherhood member decided to keep ‘anything political off my Facebook page’. He also refrained from presenting himself openly as a researcher and advocate, kept his participation in meetings and events private, and declined to author reports using his real name. In a similar case, an Iranian women’s rights advocate attested that one of her colleagues chose to withdraw from a public panel with other diaspora dissidents because his family members were being ‘held hostage in Iran’. In reflecting on self-censorship in the diaspora, she added, ‘this is very dangerous because it risks atomizing activism’. Activists recognized that proxy punishment often succeeded in isolating activists from one another and from their families, thus disempowering the broader community from advocating publicly against regimes, in accordance with their rights and liberties abroad. Yet, they had no solution for this dilemma. As a result, public anti-regime activism was delimited to a minority of highly motivated elites and well-resourced individuals. Meanwhile, respondents attested that the majority of community members worked from behind the scenes, or remained too fearful to act at all.

SUMMARY AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

In recent years, studies of transnational repression have brought important attention to how authoritarian regimes persecute exiles and diaspora communities abroad. At the same time, this paper demonstrates that authoritarian governments and their agents do not need to physically reach across borders into the territory of other states in order to repress their diasporas. To silence, punish, and control activists abroad, they alternatively exert coercive leverage against dissidents’ families in the home-country. As our study shows, *proxy punishment* comes in different forms that range in severity from physical violence and incarceration to verbal threats and travel bans. These methods are relatively cheap for regimes to enact since state officials neither need to send covert agents into a foreign territory nor manipulate outside authorities to capture and extradite their residents. All tactics within the repertoire of proxy punishment are effective, however, in making diaspora activism a high-risk, high-cost activity for individuals and their primary social groups.

After explaining the five major tactics regimes use to punish relatives and impose social-psychological pressures on diaspora members, our analysis demonstrates how proxy punishment’s deterrent effects are mitigated by two mechanisms: (1) activists’ political commitment and (2) social capital in the host-country. Diaspora members with weak commitment to activism and weak social capital responded to the threat of proxy punishment by *going silent* in order to protect their families. Those with a strong commitment to activism and strong social capital chose instead to *fight back* against regimes. Most diaspora members, however, chose to *navigate between protective and principled action* by either attempting to trick the regimes into leaving their families alone, cutting off communications with their relatives, or self-censoring their activities and visibility abroad. These members had the motivation to contest regimes, but not the means to offset the costs of doing so. Taken together, activists from Syria, Egypt, Iran, and Libya required both the

'will' and the 'way' to mobilize publicly against highly repressive regimes. The absence of these mobilizing mechanisms rendered sending-state regimes successful in keeping their critics silent and fearful across state borders.

Our study makes several theoretical interventions into the growing literature on globalized authoritarianism and transnational repression. First, the findings point to the *negative effects of transnational social ties* for anti-regime diaspora mobilization. Researchers typically consider network ties as a positive resource for diaspora activists, as they 'are empowered by the contexts in which they maintain thicker linkages' (Koinova, 2017, p. 602). In other words, the stronger their ties to home-country, the more likely they are to remain engaged in home-country affairs. We contend that the stronger their linkages to highly repressive states, the more likely activists will be exposed to authoritarian social control strategies. In fact, it is precisely the frequent use of internet communication technologies and social media—the contemporary equivalent of 'cheap calls' (Vertovec, 2004)—that create vulnerabilities for activists and their home-country relatives. With the help of digital technologies, regimes can more easily monitor the activities of diaspora dissidents, identify their contacts, and impose collective punishments on their parents, siblings, and cousins (see also Michaelsen, 2017, 2020; Moss, 2018). Because regimes instrumentalize these ties for political control, transnational networks transform into an impairment and an obstacle for transnational advocacy, despite diaspora members' advantaged 'positionalities' in relatively liberal host-countries (Koinova, 2012). Accordingly, we suggest that scholars do more to consider the multivalent, conflicting effects of cross-border ties on diasporas, since transnational networks simultaneously promote *and* curtail political engagement in social movements.

This paper also contributes to the literature on globalized authoritarianism by bringing attention to the role that cross-border collective punishment plays in the operation of regime repression and its deterrent effects. Studies of repression's influence on dissent have acknowledged the importance of family ties in fostering protection and commitment to high-risk activism (Loveman, 1998), as well as showing how an actor's responsibility for their nuclear family may deter participation in high-risk campaigns (McAdam, 1986). However, much of the extant literature on the 'repression-dissent nexus' (Earl, 2011) takes an individualistic approach, neglecting the use of state repression against activists' *non*-activist networks (Deng & O'Brien, 2013; O'Brien & Deng, 2017; Opp, 1994). This blind spot likely stems from the predominance of Western perspectives in the social sciences, which consider individual-level punishment as normative basis for the state's legal framework. Yet, this approach neglects the fact that anti-regime mobilization has meant putting one's primary social group in danger throughout most of human history (Heckathorne, 1988; Moore, 1978). Our findings highlight the need to investigate repression as a collective, relational phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state. This pervasive form of violence is likely to continuously increase in scope and severity so long as surveillance technologies make it ever-easier for illiberal authorities to track their opponents across the globe.

Our study further contributes to theories of repression's effects on protest by showing that the effects of proxy punishment on diaspora activists are not determined by the deployment of a particular tactic, or whether the threat against family members is 'hard' or 'soft' (e.g., Earl, 2011). Rather, diaspora members confront a *repertoire* of actions that are imposed on their family members at once and in a fashion that is hard for individuals to predict. Accordingly, we find that the application of a particular tactic does not determine an activist's responses; rather, activists' responses are shaped by their willingness and abilities to incur costs, both real and anticipated. Political commitment increases their *willingness* to fight despite the related risks and costs, and social capital provides the *means* for withstanding and offsetting those costs.

As in cases where regime violence has been shown to create a 'backlash' effect, radicalizing protesters (e.g., Goodwin, 2001; White, 1989), we likewise find that diaspora activists who were harshly repressed at home are more likely to express a strong commitment to oppositional activities after emigration. The importance of social capital in this process also builds on studies demonstrating how a movement's organizational capacity improves its members' resilience against state repression (Barkan, 1985; Chenoweth et al., 2017). Our findings also extend Koinova's (2012, 2017) argument that the greater diaspora members' ties to the *host*-country context, the more resources and autonomy they will have at their disposal to pursue home-country political projects. This suggests the need to further investigate the

importance of commitment and social capital as *a priori* determinants of activists' strategic adaptations, rather than assuming that activists' responses are reactive to regime tactics in a *post hoc* fashion (e.g., McAdam, 1983).

As the first study (to the best of our knowledge) to comparatively and systematically theorize the effects of proxy punishment on diasporas, this paper makes an important contribution to the burgeoning field of transnational repression studies. At the same time, we acknowledge that far more research is needed on how proxy punishment varies by emigrant group, including their particular social movement affiliations and places of residence. For instance, research shows that host-countries with strong economic and geopolitical ties to the home-country are more likely to cooperate with home-countries to enact transnational repression against common enemies, such as members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Darwich, 2017), and facilitate the unlawful extradition of exiles and human rights activists on behalf of foreign allies (Dukalskis, 2021; Schenkan & Linzer, 2021). Although our analysis does not find variation in the application of proxy punishment by respondents' countries-of-residence, researchers would benefit from larger, representative sampling to test the influence of the host-country context and its policies on the application of proxy punishment. Host-countries' condemnations of human rights abuses and related sanctions may pressure regimes to relax their reliance on proxy punishment, and regime actors may be more reticent to apply this sanction when needing to secure economic trade deals and arms sales from particular host-countries. That said, regime officials facing pushback may instead choose to increase proxy punishment as a means to demonstrate their power, steadfastness, and sovereignty in the face of condemnation from great powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom. How bilateral state alliances, regional security agreements, and specific foreign policies impact a group's vulnerability warrants further attention. Future scholarship can therefore take up these comparisons, both within regions and across them, to better understand whether or not proxy punishment can be mitigated by host-country interventions or bilateral relations.

Lastly, while the four country cases examined here demonstrate a common repertoire of proxy punishment, authoritarian regimes are constantly adding new techniques to their repressive toolkits. For instance, the governments of China and Saudi Arabia have recently forced diaspora activists' close relatives to travel abroad with security agents in order to convince them face-to-face to stop their activism (or return home for prosecution).³ Chinese agents have also called diaspora members via Skype from their parents' home as a means of intimidation (Gilbert, 2020). Further research is needed to track authoritarian learning in these contexts, and to theorize whether diaspora activists require additional forms of support to contest the pervasive problem of globalized collective punishment. We predict that without a multifaceted counter-response by states, institutions, and organizations with the capacity to speak out, this problem is only likely to worsen in the near future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study come from original studies conducted by each of the authors individually at their respective institutions. The data that support the findings of this study may be made available by special request, and will be considered in light of privacy, safety-related, and Institutional Review Board-mandated protections and restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

¹We adopt this term from Moss (2016), which references proxy punishment as one of six types of transnational repression.

²Not all regimes will have the capacity to effectively monitor diasporas and punish their relatives. Proxy punishment requires “infrastructural power” (Mann 2008) in the form of information about individuals abroad, their activities, and their families’ whereabouts at home. Regimes with weak control over their territories are therefore less likely to be effective in wielding proxy punishment against their diasporas than those with a high degree of population oversight (Moss 2016, 2022).

³In 2018, Saudi officials visited human rights defender Omar Abdulaziz in Canada and brought his brother with them to threaten Abdulaziz into returning home (Deibert 2020, p. 143). Relatedly, Chinese operatives confronted a defector-in-exile in the United States by bringing his elderly father from China to the meeting in order to coerce the exile into returning to China (US Department of Justice 2020).

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