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The Long Arm of the State: Transnational Repression against Exiled Activists from the Arab Gulf States

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Abstract: The Arab Spring was a period of intense activism demanding democracy and freedom that swept across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While previous research has focused on the role of diaspora communities in the uprisings and the strategies employed by regimes to suppress them, it has primarily centered on countries that experienced large-scale revolutions and endured severe consequences. Consequently, the current literature has failed to explore the situation of Arab Gulf dissidents living in exile, instead focusing on a few isolated incidents. This paper examines the transnational repression (TR) campaign of the Arab Gulf states (AGSs). Drawing on the literature about the long arm of authoritarianism and TR, this paper explores the various TR methods employed by the AGSs to silence activists living abroad. The paper finds that the nature of TR in the Arab Gulf region is unique when compared with other MENA countries. The TR campaign of AGSs is alarmingly expanding, using various mechanisms and resources, making the region one of the world's leading perpetrators. The methods employed by the AGSs include travel bans as part of their coercion by proxy, digital transnational repression, and the use of multilateral organizations as tools of repression. Additionally, this paper highlights the AGSs' support of other countries' TR.

Keywords: Arab Spring; Arab Gulf states; GCC; transnational repression; diasporas



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1. Introduction

The Arab Spring is a significant event in contemporary Arab politics, where people from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region united, for a brief moment, to demand freedom and human dignity. The uprisings started over a decade ago with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia in December 2010, shortly after a young street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, protesting a public humiliation by local officials. The Tunisians' chants in the streets reverberated throughout the MENA region, leading to several revolts that called for social justice, political freedom, and economic opportunities. Social scientists have extensively studied the Arab Spring, which occurred unexpectedly (Goodwin 2011) and resulted in desperate aftermaths, including a tighter authoritarian grip (Monshipouri and Dunlap 2021). The Arab Uprising disrupted regional ties and challenged commonly held notions about Arab political culture, such as the lack of democracy and the populace's tendency to tolerate tyranny (Gerges 2015). Despite the efforts of MENA leaders and their international allies to contain the protests, the masses were able to topple long-standing dictators in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt. The emerging literature started to question the role of the Arab diaspora communities in these protests and assess the effectiveness of their intervention beyond borders (Baser and Toivanen 2018; Boubakri 2013; Brand 2014; Colombo and Gozzini 2021) with much of the attention on the diasporic communities whose country of origin went through large-scale revolutions and endured horrific consequences; namely, Syria, Libya, and Yemen (Moss 2016, 2021).

This article, however, sheds light on an Arab diaspora case that has been overlooked. Many prominent Arab Gulf dissidents and political activists have fled the crackdown on opposition and escaped the region's wrath in recent years, mainly after the Arab Spring,

and have joined the Arab diaspora abroad. It is crucial to conduct a comprehensive examination of Arab Gulf dissidents in exile since the Arab Spring narrative risks focusing attention on only a few cases. Rather than providing another explanation for the large-scale Arab revolutions, it is essential to go beyond what observers identify as the immediate outcomes of the uprisings, be it the civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the re-emergence of authoritarianism in Egypt, or the relative reforms in Tunisia, and explore the uprisings' impact on the Arab Gulf activists in exile.

This paper is an exploration of transnational repression (TR) and its effects on the diaspora of Arab Gulf states (AGSs); namely, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. In particular, the study focuses on how the AGSs silence their opposition voices and advance their TR campaigns, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The study involves an extensive literature review and data analysis, which examines the unique nature of TR in the Arab Gulf region, the formal and informal cooperation between the six AGSs, how they aid other countries' repression campaigns, and the severe consequences of this growing phenomenon. The analysis is followed by a conclusion that summarizes the key findings, identifies gaps in current research, and highlights the need for further study.

2. Materials and Methods

Researching in authoritarian states presents several challenges ([Ahram and Goode 2016](#); [Grimm et al. 2020](#); [Janenova 2019](#); [Wackenhut 2018](#)). One of the significant challenges is accessing governmental records and formal/informal agreements between states and multilateral organizations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, particularly in the Arab Gulf region. Additionally, researching state-led repression is complicated as many incidents may go unnoticed by the international community and global media, making it challenging for researchers to understand the lengths to which states are willing to go to silence critical voices. Also, data on repression beyond nation-state borders focus primarily on prominent activists and asylum seekers who identify themselves as targets of regimes' long-distance repression. However, emerging critics, including youths and students, may be less likely to share their personal experiences or recognize themselves as dissidents, which could impact the quality of research and hinder the researcher's ability to determine the magnitude of repression and its impact on diaspora mobilization. Furthermore, cooperation between authoritarian states and non-state actors such as PR firms, tech companies, and political consultancies complicates the researcher's ability to identify the repression synergy. Finally, researchers studying authoritarianism face safety risks, particularly local researchers in and from the Global South.

Research in "closed contexts" requires different methods than those used in open contexts, which calls for a greater level of reflexivity and analysis. In this paper, I thoroughly analyze various data sources to examine transnational repression (TR) in the Arab Gulf region. The sources include Freedom House datasets, Citizen Lab reports, governmental publications, formal and informal agreements between states and multilateral organizations, mainly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and published interviews with state officials. Also, this study utilizes available testimonies of exiled Arab Gulf dissidents, official statements from diaspora organizations, and documents from international non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International, MENA Rights Group, Human Rights Watch, and multiple inter-governmental organizations. When applicable, statistical data, media publications, and internet websites are also used.

This study focuses on TR carried out by the Arab Gulf states (AGSs); namely, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman, in the wake of the Arab Spring. To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, I cross-checked multiple sources and only used reliable documents that could be traced back to their origin, had a clear timeline, and were produced by trustworthy authors and publishers. While presenting the testimonies and experiences of the Arab Gulf diaspora, this paper also presents the responses/statements of AGSs officials when applicable to maintain objectivity

throughout the research. Lastly, I cross-reference the relevant literature on the long arm of authoritarianism and TR to further validate the findings and understand the issue within this theoretical framework.

3. Literature Review

3.1. *The Arab Spring Recap*

According to the exceptionalist school, the six Arab Gulf states (AGSs), which include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman, were thought to have been largely unaffected by the Arab Spring uprisings (Abdulla 2014). Nevertheless, in this paper, I highlight that the AGSs were not immune; instead, the ruling regimes managed to promptly oppress the revolution and dilute its intensity, as seen in the case of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Following the mass protests in Tunisia and Egypt, thousands of Bahrainis organized a “Day of Rage” to demand political reforms and more significant opportunities for the marginalized Shia community. It is worth noting that in the early weeks of protests, Bahrainis were calling for “fair and democratic governance” (McMurray and Ufheil-Somers 2013), which could be explained by the concept of “refolutions”, coined by Asef Bayat to describe the distinctive blend of revolutionary movements and social reforms during and after 2011 uprisings (Bayat 2017). Nonetheless, the Bahraini regime swiftly shut down the peaceful protests, prompting the AGSs to send troops to assist the ruling family of Bahrain in restoring stability (Aljazeera 2021). On 14 March 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) announced that Saudi-led forces would be sent to Bahrain to support the regime. The Peninsula Shield, the GCC combined force, involved 1200 troops from Saudi Arabia and 800 from the UAE, and a Saudi official confirmed the cooperation by stating, “Bahrain will get whatever assistance it needs. It is open-ended” (Bronner and Slackman 2011).

While the Bahraini government demolished the Pearl Roundabout, the headquarters of demonstrations, in an attempt to wipe out the memory of the people’s revolt (Fibiger 2017), it also instigated sectarian tensions between the Sunni and Shia groups in the country in order to divert attention from the need for democratic reform and state transformation (Matthiesen 2013). Bahrain’s Pearl Uprising has often been portrayed as a conflict between the Shia majority population and the Sunni elite and opened the door for debating whether it is based on actual social inequality or merely a religious conflict (Gengler 2014). This narrow analysis of either/or fails to capture the broader political and economic grievances of the Shia community, who make up 60 percent of the population. The Uprising was a cry call for the ruling regime to bring about meaningful changes to the constitution and form of government. Nonetheless, to prevent Sunni citizens from joining the mass protests and voicing their own demands, “the state propagate[d] anti-Shi’a sentiment and demonize[d] the opposition as an Iranian-backed fifth column” (Kurzman et al. 2013). The Bahraini regime has also framed the protesters as a security threat to the country and the broader Gulf region, which allowed for state-led repression with the backing of the GCC (Mabon 2019). The work of Ellen Lust-Okar could explain this political strategy in times of unrest. When ruling elites do not create divisions between the opposition, dissidents unite collectively and use their grievances to create widespread opposition. Hence, ruling regimes resort to divisions and labels such as “loyalist and radical camps”, where those who are moderates fear that the radical opposition would manipulate the protests to advance their own agenda and decide not to mobilize with them (Lust-Okar 2004).

In Bahrain’s neighboring country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), a coalition of individuals, including liberals, human rights activists, and Sunni and Shia Muslims, created a Facebook page also called “Day of Rage” to call for political reform in the Saudi Kingdom. The page gained over 30,000 supporters within and beyond the state’s borders. As this coalition called for peaceful protests in Riyadh, Saudi’s capital city, Saudi police reacted promptly and installed checkpoints at many key intersections. The forces were stationed outside Al Rajhi Mosque and other locations where demonstrators had been asked to stage protests. Additionally, a helicopter was deployed to monitor these locations

(Murphy 2011). The officials tried to justify the small turnout of protesters to Reuters, “It is not in our culture to protest like in other countries” (Johnston and Laessing 2011).

Despite this, the Saudi Shia minority group, who reside in the oil-producing east and share a border with Bahrain, organized small protests in the central city of Qatif and its neighboring town of Awwamiya, spreading to Hofuf (Murphy 2011). In these protests, the demonstrators called for the release of prisoners allegedly held without trial. Also, the masses protested against economic hardship, anti-Shia discrimination, and limited political opportunities. Still, the Saudi regime banned these demonstrations, indicating it would no longer tolerate Shia protests in the region. “The kingdom’s regulations ban all sorts of demonstrations, marches, sit-ins”, the Interior Ministry said, adding that security forces would stop all attempts to disrupt public order (Laessing 2011).

Researchers use this short period of revolts in the Arab Gulf region as proof of the region’s immunity to the Arab Spring and that it was a short period that ended within a few months in early 2011. In this paper, conversely, I argue that the Arab Spring is a dynamic process with no ending point that could erupt again at any moment. *Anatomies of Revolution* states that “revolutions are dynamic processes that change over time and place” (Lawson 2019, p. 6). Also, the Arab Spring was vital in fostering the emergence of the AGSs as “visible global actors” (Ulrichsen 2016), which had a significant impact that extended beyond borders. Hence, due to the AGSs’ reaction to the protests and crackdown on the opposition, many activists were pushed to flee the region, leading to the emergence of new waves of diasporic politics. More than a decade later, the Arab Gulf regimes are still suppressing people both domestically and internationally to prevent a recurrence of this historic moment.

3.2. Diasporas

Defining the term diaspora has proven to be challenging despite numerous attempts since the 1990s, with scholars suggesting that the abundance of associated meanings is a measure of strength rather than a weakness (Winland 2007). Theorist Khachig Tölölyan describes diasporas as “the exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (Tölölyan 1996), and our understanding of this concept indicates the “changing nature of processes—and experiences—of displacement, dislocation, mobility, and settlement that have marked human societies” (Fazal and Tsagarousianou 2002). Although diaspora is still connected to dispersal, it no longer distinguishes between voluntary and forced displacement (Tsolidis 2011) and is not limited to catastrophic events (Cohen 1996). Additionally, Safran uses diaspora as a metaphoric designation to refer to different groups of individuals—“expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities tout court” (Safran 1991).

Diaspora refers to any community living away from their homeland (Cohen 1992), and these diasporic groups have historically played a crucial role in mobilizing against authoritarian regimes and “transformation of home” (Adamson 2002). Dissidents abroad have been at the forefront of revolutions throughout history, including Sun Yat-sen, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Vladimir Lenin, as they belong to multiple nations and have diverse identities. By uniting to fight against oppression, exiles have been instrumental in promoting social change and exercising their “voice after exit” (Newland 2010). International relations (IR) scholars have shown great interest in diasporic communities due to their continued relationship with their countries of origin (Beaugrand and Geisser 2016; Brand 2014; Cainkar 2013). Additionally, diasporas have played essential roles in conflict and conflict resolution in their homelands (Lindenstrauss 2018).

Research on the involvement of diasporas in domestic politics within the MENA region is limited, apart from the Palestinian and Kurdish diasporic communities and their impact on their respective homelands (Colombo and Gozzini 2021). However, the Arab Spring has revolutionized the diaspora rhetoric in the region and introduced new methods of political involvement and diaspora networks (Adamson 2016; Beaugrand and Geisser 2016). The mass protests across the region have led to a greater political engagement of diaspora

populations, creating an Arab Diaspora Spring. The theory of quotidian disruption explains why this engagement has happened after years of fear and silence, as the interruption of everyday practices, routines, and expectations triggered social breakdown and voice emergence (Snow et al. 1998). As a result, the Arab diaspora has regained their ability to actively come together to call for change (Moss 2016, 2021).

3.3. *The Privileged Diaspora*

Throughout periods of peace and conflict, migration and movement have been fundamental in the MENA region from ancient times to the present (Gorman and Kasbarian 2015). Nevertheless, after the Arab Spring, there has been a significant rise in Arab emigration. The International Migration Stock reports that over 26 million Arabs have relocated from their home countries as of mid-2020 (Colombo and Gozzini 2021). This figure makes up 10 percent of the international migrant stock and approximately 6 percent of the region's total population. This percentage is twice as high as the global average (Colombo and Gozzini 2021). The migration flow includes voluntary and involuntary migration, arising from excessive political repression and harsh economic situations following the Arab Uprising. The MENA region has undergone sweeping changes that have negatively affected the job market, leading to an increase in unemployment rates (Fakih et al. 2020) from 32.9 percent in 2012 to 36.5 percent in 2020 (International Labour Organization 2020). As a result, many Arab citizens from troubled nations such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt sought refuge within or outside the region. Despite not being a signatory to the 1952 UN Refugee Convention, Saudi Arabia has welcomed economic migrants and asylum seekers after 2011, mainly from Syria. Additionally, MENA rulers who were overthrown during the protests have found refuge in Saudi Arabia, including Ben Ali of Tunisia and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen. So, why are the diaspora of the AGSs leaving the region despite its relative stability and oil-rich economy?

During and after the Arab Spring, the Arab Gulf dissidents did not flee because of wars, poor economic conditions, or lack of opportunities. Instead, those highly educated, wealthy, or previously connected to the ruling regimes, hence the "privileged" term, escaped the region due to the AGSs' hostility toward activists. This trend began during the 2011 uprising and intensified in recent years. For instance, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Saudi asylum seekers between 2012 and 2017 have increased by 318 percent, from 200 to 815 (Middle East Monitor 2019). Also, based on UNHCR data, in 2022 alone, 763 people from Saudi Arabia fled and applied for asylum in other countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Based on information published in World Data, the acceptance rate is 100 percent for Saudis applying for asylum in France, the Netherlands, and Ireland (WorldData.info 2022). The number of dissidents living in exile may be higher than the reported figures because some individuals may fear persecution and choose not to apply for asylum officially. This is particularly true for students who may risk losing their government scholarships or those who fear for the safety of their family members who still reside in their home country. While some may choose to leave voluntarily, it is essential to acknowledge that others may be forced to flee for political reasons and fear of state repression and imprisonment. In this regard, the increasing number of Saudi asylum seekers has become a concern for the Saudi administration, with an internal government report predicting that by 2030, the number of Saudi exiles may reach 50,000 (Al-Sharif 2019).

The Arab Gulf privileged diaspora contains diverse political backgrounds, including liberals, Islamists, leftists, feminists, and others. Despite their limited number and being an understudied case in the literature of Arab diaspora and state repression, the AGSs' diaspora are targets of systematic repression. In October 2018, the world was shocked to the core when the assassination of the Saudi journalist and critic Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey came to be known. Ironically, five years after this incident, it still stands as a clear message to all AGSs' dissidents living abroad that no one is out of the state's reach. The notorious cases of authoritarian reach across borders similar to that of Khashoggi are not

rare or exclusive ones but are terrifying consequences of the evolving repression techniques around the globe.

The post-Arab Spring backlash against dissidents and counter-revolutionary measures have facilitated the demobilization and lack of remobilization of anti-regime opposition, including those in the diaspora, as exemplified by the case of the Bahraini diaspora in London (Fibiger 2020) and the Syrian diaspora in Denmark (Yonus 2020). According to researchers, several factors explain why social activism declined during and after the Arab Spring. First, protests' failure to affect meaningful change on the ground has created "morally injurious events that resulted in cognitive dissonance among most novice participants" (Karmel and Kuburic 2021, p. 2). Second, the demobilization could be due to "state repression and violence or more general popular apathy" (Rennick 2019), where protestors feel they no longer can effectively intervene in the political sphere. Finally, conflict transmission, which refers to "the reproduction of home-country conflicts within diaspora groups through emigrants' biographical and identity-based ties" (Moss 2021, p. 71), may also be a factor hindering social activism, particularly in cases with large diaspora communities where divisions and factions are more prevalent.

In this paper, I argue that as the AGSs' diaspora of dissidents is smaller in number compared to other MENA diaspora groups, and with the absence of prolonged revolutions in the Arab Gulf region that could transmit domestic conflicts abroad or create morally injurious events, the primary obstacle hindering their activism is state-led repression beyond borders. Despite that, the AGSs' diaspora continues to engage with the international community by lobbying governmental and non-governmental organizations and exploring innovative ways to combat authoritarianism, as in the case of the Saudi diaspora (Al-Rasheed 2021). In return, the AGSs are responding by intensifying their control over the opposition and expanding their toolkit of repressive measures. In the following sections, I will delve into the long-distance repression committed by AGSs and the challenges it presents.

3.4. *The Long Arm of the State*

The discourse on government intervention in the affairs of their citizens living abroad often sparks debates on territories, jurisdictions, and foreign influence. Whether the discussion is about the formal regulations for citizenship or the citizens' political affiliations beyond state borders, the regime's long arm is seen as intrusive and unacceptable to many as it goes against the idea of national integrity in the "new" home country. Additionally, the cross-border activities of the diaspora community members, including marrying from their country of origin, are often viewed as problematic remnants of their pre-migration times. This ongoing discussion highlights the complexities of loyalty and citizenship in a globalized world.

Comparative research has been increasingly focused on the factors that can hinder democratic transitions and stabilize authoritarian regimes since the third wave of democratization ended. In this regard, researchers explained the longevity of autocracies and why some dictatorships remain stable while others collapse. For instance, according to Gerschewski's theory, authoritarian resilience relies on three pillars: repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski 2013), and this framework has been fundamental in the arena of migration and diasporas (Glasius 2018). Additionally, recent research has drawn on multiple fields, including political sociology and IR, to identify various authoritarianism strategies that states employ beyond borders. These strategies include transnational repression, legitimation, co-optation, and cooperation (Tsourapas 2021). While intending to control dissidents in exile, these strategies involve a wide range of collaboration between states and non-state actors, including multinational corporations, diaspora groups, and international organizations (Adamson 2020). In this regard, the literature on diaspora studies suggests increased state-sponsored diaspora initiatives, leading to a proliferation of diaspora governance institutions worldwide. Turkey provides a pertinent example of how states can establish transnational state apparatuses, which can have either positive or

negative implications, and how such repressive policies have also shaped diasporas (Baser and Ozturk 2020; Erdi Öztürk and Taş 2020).

This discussion leads us to investigate further the so-called “the long arm of authoritarianism”. This phenomenon refers to how states use their power to control and manipulate their populations beyond territories, impacting diasporic and exile communities (Lewis 2015). Researchers have studied the circumstances under which authoritarian states exert control over people living abroad (Tsourapas 2020), as authoritarian regimes have realized that relying solely on domestic oppression is insufficient to maintain their power and guarantee survival. As a result, for the past decade, autocrats have expanded their reach beyond national borders to suppress opposing voices, undermine democracy, and alter international norms and institutions in favor of their agendas. There is growing evidence of how authoritarian regimes invade foreign states’ sovereignty and violate fundamental human rights and diaspora protection with a level of collaboration between states and non-state actors, which is part of a concerning phenomenon known as transnational repression (TR).

TR refers to the actions taken by authoritarian governments against their citizens in foreign countries, which will be discussed in detail later on. Many Arab Gulf dissidents in exile who have fled from oppression in their home countries, hoping to live without fear of persecution in other nations, find it challenging to obtain protection. These autocracies resort to physical threats, spyware, and a wide range of tactics to suppress the diaspora abroad, even in their new safe harbor (Abramowitz and Schenkan 2021).

Following the death of Alaa Alsiddiq, a prominent Emirati human rights activist based in the United Kingdom (UK), her friends and colleagues worried about saying their final goodbyes and mourning her death inside London Central Mosque in fear of being associated with the activist and becoming themselves the target of the Emirati state transnational reach or risking the safety of their loved ones back home (Kirchgaessner 2021). Alsiddiq moved out of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) after her father’s arrest, the prominent activist Mohammed Alsiddiq, in 2012. Alaa sought refuge in Qatar at first and then settled in London in 2019. Alaa was harassed online, her father and family were stripped of their citizenship, and shortly after her death, the Citizen Lab confirmed that her phone was surveilled and hacked by the regime since she left the country after the Arab Spring (MENA Rights Group 2022a). The story of Alaa Alsiddiq shows the multilevel state’s control across borders and the intertwining between various tactics not only to silence dissidents but also to make others fear the possibility of becoming victims of authoritarianism.

3.5. *Voice, Exit, and the Arab Gulf States’ Mission*

Is there no other way for us? Must we choose between movie theaters and our rights as citizens to speak out, whether in support of or critical of our government’s actions? Do we only voice glowing references to our leader’s decisions, his vision of our future, in exchange for the right to live and travel freely—for ourselves and our wives, husbands and children too?

—Jamal Khashoggi, Washington Post, 21 May 2018

In the early years following independence, governments in the MENA region paid little attention to their expatriate communities as they were often seen as disloyal and potentially involved in political opposition. However, between the 1980s and 1990s, policies inspired by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shifted attitudes toward Arab diasporas. The Arab diaspora communities were recognized as potential assets for national development through remittances and political support back home (Fargues 2013). Despite this recognition, when diaspora members began exercising their civil rights and enjoying freedom, they were again labeled traitors and terrorists. Hollifield explains this phenomenon as the liberal paradox; when democratic states want the open trade of goods and economic growth, there is a greater political risk (Hollifield 2004).

On the contrary, Tsourapas phrases it as the illiberal paradox, where authoritarian regimes are caught in the dilemma between supporting migration and preventing people’s

political intervention from without (Tsourapas 2021). This dilemma is presented in the classical work of Albert Hirschman on Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. When faced with injustice or a negative situation within a country, individuals have three choices: physically leave (exit), express discomfort and work towards change (voice), or wait and hope for improvement (loyalty) (Hirschman 1972). Hirschman's theory suggests that people often exit a situation instead of using their voice because it requires less resources, effort, and persistence (Hirschman 1978). In addition, authoritarian regimes expect citizens' loyalty not only to the state but also to the leader.

It is important to note that social media and digital technology have significantly facilitated and complicated efforts to address this issue. While Arab Gulf diaspora voices existed before the rise of online platforms, such as the "Voice of Bahrain" in London, which originated in the early 1980s, the landscape has significantly changed since the advent of these technologies. During the early days of the Arab Spring, youths, and activists from all walks of political life utilized social media sites to mobilize and coordinate mass protests across the region. However, as discussed in various studies, regimes also employed these technologies to spread deception and disinformation (Jones 2022). Later, MENA regimes, particularly the technology-savvy AGSs, exploited these digital tools and other strategies to coerce opposition within and beyond national borders.

4. Conceptual Framework: Transnational Repression

Transnational repression (TR), broadly meaning targeting political dissidents beyond borders, is a phenomenon that has increasingly come under the spotlight in recent years. The trend was first dubbed in Dana Moss's work to explain why, when, and how authoritarian regimes oppress their diaspora (Moss 2016). While the focus of Dana Moss was on the Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni diaspora in the United States (US) and Britain, this practice extends beyond the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as state repression tactics and the reproduction of domestic disputes abroad reverberate with diaspora groups worldwide (Abushammalah 2022).

Despite the term's recent origins, dissidents in exile have been targeted since early times. In 1991, Iran's last prime minister under the Shah, Shapour Bakhtiar, was assassinated near Paris by agents of the Iranian regime. Also, Augusto Pinochet's secret police killed the Chilean dissident Orlando Letelier in Washington, DC, in 1976. A couple of years later, while living in London, Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian writer and journalist, was killed by a poison-laced pellet, allegedly by a Bulgarian intelligence agent. Nonetheless, it is vital to acknowledge that the modalities and disturbing events are expanding in countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and Rwanda, including the first documented cases in Djibouti and Bangladesh in 2022 (Gorokhovskaia et al. 2023).

TR is ubiquitous in the MENA region, with the second-highest number of physical incidents recorded in Freedom House's report on TR, following only Asia. Notably, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have recorded physical incidents since 2014 (Schenkkan and Linzer 2021). While TR is an old practice by authoritarian regimes, its prevalence has risen due to the advancement of indirect strategies that do not require physical harm, as such measures can draw global attention, elevate diplomatic tensions, and violate the sovereignty of powerful host countries. The following section will present a comprehensive analysis of several TR methods employed by the Arab Gulf states (AGSs).

4.1. Coercion by Proxy

Proxy punishment is "The harassment, physical confinement, and/or bodily harm of relatives in the home-country as a means of information-gathering and retribution against dissidents abroad" (Moss 2016). As it is not a direct or physical approach, this tactic is considered a cost-effective TR tool that avoids public attention and does not cause diplomatic disputes between the home state and the host state (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020).

According to Arab Gulf dissidents in exile, the AGSs are increasingly targeting the families of detained critics and dissidents residing abroad. According to Sayed Alwadaei, director of advocacy at the UK-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), his family-in-law, who are living in Bahrain, are paying the price of his activism from London through unlawful detention and ill-treatment by the regime. Additionally, Omar Abdulaziz, a Canadian-based Saudi activist, has reported that his brothers, Ahmad Alzahrani (24) and Abdulmajeed Alzahrani (19), were arrested in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, due to his online remarks about the diplomatic dispute between Riyadh and Toronto on social media (Maza 2018).

Moreover, Abdullah Alaoudh, the Secretary-General and co-founder of the National Assembly Party (NAAS), Saudi Arabia's first openly declared political party, says that the government uses travel bans as a tool of intimidation and coercion to "manipulate the public sphere and keep everyone under tight control" (AFP 2021). In 2017, a one-year-old baby was among the 19 members of Alaoudh's family who were banned from leaving the Kingdom. According to legal consultant Dimah Alsharif, the travel ban policy is a "legitimate precautionary measure" implemented by state officials to ensure that individuals under investigation or facing legal action remain within the Kingdom (AlSharif 2020). Also, Alsharif adds that it is required that the person be officially notified of the travel ban within one week of its issuance (AlSharif 2020). Nonetheless, there have been cases where individuals, such as the Saudi woman activist Loujain al-Hathloul's parents, were not aware of their travel ban until they reached the airport and were informed by Saudi officials that they could not leave the country (AFP 2021).

On 9 July 2023, a retired Saudi teacher named Muhammad al-Ghamdi was convicted by Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism tribunal, the Specialized Criminal Court. He was found guilty of criminal offenses related to his peaceful online expression and was sentenced to death. The court used his tweets, retweets, and YouTube activity as evidence against him, even though he only shared five tweets from a fake account and had a small following of nine across platforms, which raises concerns about why he is being persecuted. Saeed al-Ghamdi, a UK-based Saudi scholar and Muhammad al-Ghamdi's brother, explained on his X account (formerly Twitter) that this is happening because Saeed opposes the Saudi regime from abroad and refuses the government's requests to return to Saudi Arabia. This case highlights authoritarian regimes' extreme measures to silence those who speak out against them by targeting their families back home and restricting their movement.

4.2. Digital Repression

With our growing dependence on technology, diaspora activists are becoming vulnerable to digital authoritarianism. Governments with autocratic tendencies use different digital methods and tactics to coerce and silence those who speak out against them without any consequences (Abushammalah 2023). Across the globe, activists who have fled authoritarian regimes to seek refuge still face digital intimidation. This phenomenon is known as digital transnational repression (DTR), and it involves deception, disinformation, monitoring, targeted surveillance, device hacking, and harassment of diasporas with links to their home countries (Al-Jizawi et al. 2021; Jones 2022; Moss 2018). Despite the possibility of finding safety in other countries, many dissidents in exile continue their activism under constant surveillance by their home governments, making it extremely difficult to escape authoritarian repression. According to Forensic Architecture, a research agency based in London, there have been 326 documented cases of DTR between 2019 and 2021, which is a significant increase from the 105 cases documented between 2017 and 2019 (Silverberg 2022).

DTR is rapidly becoming a cornerstone of everyday suppression of dissent and activism across borders. This approach threatens the rights and freedoms of exiled individuals, as it is a cost-effective means of repression and could be efficiently conducted with just a few clicks. Also, it is challenging to keep track of the complete spectrum of digital authoritarianism or claim that "we know it all" (Jones 2022). The technologically advanced AGSs, primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have used technology and social media platforms to manipulate and target individuals locally and internationally since the Arab Spring.

The Citizen Lab of Canada data detected twelve spyware operators focusing on the Middle East region. The research group at the University of Toronto identified operator KINGDOM as the reason behind targeting Amnesty staff and a Saudi activist in exile. Additionally, the Citizen Lab found evidence of penetration by Pegasus spyware, a surveillance tool produced by the Israeli NSO Group, on the mobile phone of Omar Abdulaziz (Marczak et al. 2018), as well as Saad Al-Jabri, a former top Saudi intelligence chief and dissident in Canada. Al-Jabri took legal action against the Saudi government in August 2020, filing a lawsuit in Washington, DC, in which he alleged that the regime had installed spyware on his devices and planned to forcibly bring him back to Saudi Arabia against his will.

As highlighted in a Citizen Lab of Canada report, it is essential to acknowledge that using different DTR tools can significantly impact dissidents living in exile. The report reveals that dissidents residing in Canada may suffer from psychological and emotional harm, such as self-censorship, modifying their daily routine activities to protect themselves from physical attacks, self-imposed isolation, anxiety, and depression (Al-Jizawi et al. 2022). Hence, DTR is crucial in demobilizing the diaspora activists, especially those without enough international attention and backing.

4.3. Weaponizing Regional and International Organizations

4.3.1. INTERPOL Abuse

Utilizing international institutions to advance state-led TR is not new. Researchers have identified how autocrats have misused the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) to attack their opponents abroad by issuing “red notices” for specific individuals (Cooley 2019; Furstenberg et al. 2021; Lemon 2019). As a result of these warrants, all national police forces in INTERPOL member states are expected to arrest and extradite the suspects. The AGSs are not exempt from this practice. For example, Saudi Arabia has a long history of forcibly bringing back dissidents, resulting in imprisonments, preventing traveling and movements, or even forced disappearance.

While INTERPOL’s Red Notices aims to bring perpetrators to justice, authoritarian governments have weaponized this tool to restrict the movement of political opponents and forcibly bring them back home. With the move to an online platform, it is now even more accessible and convenient for governments to do so. Although politically motivated notices are not allowed, there are no consequences for those who create them, which can negatively impact diasporic individuals, especially in countries without immigrant protections (Schenkkan and Linzer 2021).

Mesaed Al Musaleem is a Kuwaiti businessman and blogger arrested multiple times in Kuwait between 2011 and 2016 for his activism and for expressing opinions on online platforms regarding domestic and regional issues. In 2017, Al Musaleem fled the country due to fear of persecution by the regime and applied for asylum in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where he hoped to settle and advance his professional career. One year later, the Kuwaiti Public Prosecution issued a Red Notice for Al Musaleem’s arrest and extradition back to his home country. Following the warrant, the Bosnian officials arrested Al Musaleem and began considering the extradition request. However, special procedures mandate holders made multiple appeals to the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina to protect Al Musaleem and not to act upon the INTERPOL Red Notice, as it was politically motivated. Eventually, the Commission for the Control of INTERPOL’s Files removed the warrant online. Nevertheless, the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to put Al Musaleem under house arrest and rejected his asylum application (MENA Rights Group 2022b).

There are multiple examples of how the AGSs have taken advantage of the INTERPOL long arm to bring back dissidents forcibly. Hakeem al-Araibi, a football player from Bahrain, was arrested by Bahraini officials with the help of INTERPOL due to his criticism of the government. He was held for over two months in Thailand before being released only after international pressure (The Guardian 2019). Additionally, it has been reported that the Bahraini government extradited a political dissident named Ahmed Jaffar Mohammed Ali from Serbia after issuing a Red Notice. The London-based Bahrain Institute for Rights

and Democracy (BIRD) shared the information and emphasized that despite the European Court of Human Rights ruling against the extradition, Ali was sent back to Bahrain as requested ([Aljazeera 2022](#)). These examples show the AGSs' willingness to manipulate INTERPOL and institutionalize its TR campaign against dissidents in exile.

4.3.2. The Gulf Cooperation Council

As various reports on TR show, there is some degree of collaboration between the origin and host countries, mainly in cases of detentions and deportations, in which the host country acts on official requests from the home state. Also, it is a common factor in renditions, in which the victim is forcibly sent to the home country with no legal justifications ([Schenkkan and Linzer 2021](#)).

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a political and economic alliance of the six AGSs that was established in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia, in May 1981 in response to the Iranian Revolution. The GCC is a crucial instrument of TR in the Arab Gulf region. In 2004, the GCC member states signed an anti-terrorism security agreement calling for information sharing between the member states and pledging to advance their efforts against growing threats. Also, in 2012, a joint security agreement by GCC members was formed and agreed upon to undermine people's freedom and closely surveil and share their information. For instance, Article 3 states: "Each state party should take legal measures on any act considered a crime under its existing legislation when its citizens or residents interfere in the domestic affairs of any other state parties" ([HRW 2014](#)). With such vague wording, AGSs can silence dissidents' voices and interfere with their privacy rights. Later, between 2013 and 2014, all GCC member states except Kuwait signed various agreements to "extradite persons in their territory who have been charged or convicted by competent authorities in any state party" ([HRW 2014](#)). These agreements not only confirm the cooperation among the AGSs to fight against terrorism but also the use of GCC as a tool to target political opposition.

According to the Freedom House report on TR, there have been incidents of Saudi nationals being kidnapped and forcibly deported back to the country from different AGSs ([Schenkkan and Linzer 2021](#)). In all the examples presented, there is evident cooperation between the home and host countries, which shows the institutionalization of the TR campaign in the Arab Gulf region with the help of the GCC. In 2017, a Saudi human rights defender named Mohammed Al-Otaibi fled the country due to his activism. While en route to seek asylum in Norway, the Qatari security forces arrested Al-Otaibi at Doha's airport and forcibly sent him back to Saudi Arabia without legal justification. One year after this incident, while living and studying in the UAE, Loujain al-Hathloul, a Saudi woman activist, was arrested by the Emirates officials and deported back to Saudi Arabia, where she was imprisoned for multiple years due to her activism for women's rights and the end of male guardianship.

In another instance of cooperation among the GCC states, Nawaf al-Rasheed, a dual Saudi-Qatari citizen, was arrested by Kuwaiti authorities and deported to Saudi Arabia despite no apparent record of political activity. Kuwait's Ministry of Interior confirmed their cooperation with the Saudi regime to send back al-Rasheed through the Ministry's X account (formerly Twitter) with the justification that it is due to "bilateral mutual security arrangements" ([HRW 2020](#); [Schenkkan and Linzer 2021](#)).

It is worth noting that not all cases of forced deportations are documented or officially recorded. Some of these incidents occur informally, without written agreements or publicly available notices, which makes it challenging to understand the degree of cooperation among GCC member states ([Carlson and Koremenos 2020](#); [HRW 2014](#); [Sciutto and Herb 2017](#)). Furthermore, as mentioned by Marc Jones, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE are among the top ten foreign spenders on Western PR companies from 2016 to 2019 ([Jones 2022](#)). This demonstrates that the AGSs spend money to whitewash its record and appeal to the international community, which obscures the ability to grasp the full extent of its TR collaboration.

5. The Arab Gulf States' Backing TR

As the Arab Gulf states (AGSs) deploy a wide range of transnational repression (TR) strategies to target their diaspora communities across borders, they also aid other nations in their TR endeavors. Over the past few years, China has strengthened its relationship with various Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have complied with China's requests to detain or deport Uyghurs, a predominantly Muslim, Turkic-speaking ethnic group, back to China.

During his visit to China in February 2019, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) expressed his support and respect for China's anti-terrorism and anti-extremism measures. However, activists argued that this was a way of endorsing Beijing's crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the northwestern region of China. As a result, the Saudi government collaborated with Chinese authorities and agreed to issue joint letters in support of China's counterterrorism and de-extremism measures in Xinjiang. In 2019, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and 36 other countries signed a letter at the United Nations to support China's policies in the region ([Jardine and Greer 2022](#)).

Two years later, in 2022, Amnesty International called for the Saudi regime to immediately set free the detained Uyghur individuals inside Saudi jails in Mecca city, including a young girl with her mother, and not deport them to China by force ([Amnesty International 2022](#)). As stated by Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, "Deporting these four people—including a child—to China, where Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities are facing a horrific campaign of mass internment, persecution, and torture, would be an outrageous violation of international law" ([Amnesty International 2022](#)).

6. Conclusions

"Over the past two decades, the Middle East has witnessed a 'transition' away from—and then back toward—authoritarianism".

—([Brumberg 2002](#), p. 56)

Although almost twenty-two years have passed, the statement above accurately describes the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The social movements began in 2011, a time of social upheaval against authoritarianism, which resulted in the revival of people's voices and spirits across borders. Nonetheless, shortly after this transition, autocrats re-emerged with tighter grips and iron fists to coerce dissidents within and beyond their territories. While recent research started to question how authoritarian regimes targeted their diaspora during and after the Arab Spring, the literature often overlooks the Arab Gulf diaspora, with most attention focused on the diaspora from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries that experienced significant revolutions and major consequences.

By focusing on an understudied case in the state-led transnational repression (TR) campaign, this paper finds a different methodological and political nature of TR. Since the beginning of the Arab Uprising, the Arab Gulf States (AGSs) employed a wide range of anti-revolution measures to contain the spillover effects of the Arab protests and silence critical voices. Nevertheless, over a decade after the Arab Spring, the AGSs are growing and evolving in their TR. The data show that AGSs have a higher level of long-distance repression compared to MENA countries with limited resources and instability due to long-lasting revolutions and horrific aftermaths. This phenomenon shows that the Arab Spring is not a moment that has ended but rather a cry for change that could erupt at any time.

As the AGSs have silenced all critical voices and even those who do not speak in favor of the state domestically, such as clerics, women activists, liberals, youths, and religious minorities, they are continuing to target the opposition abroad to ensure that they will not use their relative freedom, skills, and connections to criticize the regimes from outside. Additionally, as the AGSs aim to maintain their regional and global stability and advance their power, they are resorting to various non-physical and indirect tools to target their diaspora, including coercion by proxy, the utilization of various digital repression tools, and

multilateral organizations. By doing that, the AGSs can control, coerce, and forcibly bring back dissidents without inclosing the involvement of the home-country regimes, as it could affect the AGSs' human rights records, violate the sovereignty of other countries, and bring about unwanted media attention. Furthermore, the AGSs not only employ intimidation and suppression on their diasporas overseas, but they do so extensively, with Saudi Arabia ranking among the world's top perpetrators in the Freedom House's database on TR. Hence, it indicates the need to focus on the TR of the Arab Gulf diaspora. Additionally, the AGSs collaborate with other authoritarian regimes to oppress other diaspora groups to maintain political and economic ties.

Lastly, this paper argues that the AGSs' diaspora, an understudied case in the TR literature, is essential to be investigated, and it paves the way for a more case-focused analysis of TR in the region and around the globe. Finally, this paper aims to urge academics and decision-makers to engage in the discourse of TR and take proactive measures to protect possible victims in the diaspora, prevent the advancement of such campaigns, and further study the impact of TR on diasporic communities and politics.

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