

Transnational Repression: How to Face It

A step-by-step protection and advocacy guide for WLC members, exiles, diaspora leaders, and frontline activists.

Purpose: help activists recognize, document, report, and counter threats that authoritarian regimes project beyond their borders.

Core idea: Transnational repression is the attempt by an authoritarian regime to silence, intimidate, punish, or control people outside its borders. The response must combine personal safety, documentation, legal action, public narrative, and international pressure.

1. Start with a simple definition

For WLC purposes, transnational repression means any attempt by a state or its proxies to reach across borders to intimidate, surveil, threaten, abduct, assault, defame, legally harass, or punish exiles, diaspora members, journalists, activists, politicians, religious leaders, students, or their families. It often targets people the regime still claims as its own citizens, nationals, or communities of origin.

It can be physical, digital, legal, financial, psychological, or administrative. It may involve embassies, intelligence services, proxy groups, family intimidation inside the country, online harassment, spyware, Interpol abuse, passport denial, or threats against relatives.

2. Recognize the warning signs

Task	Why it matters	What to do now
Direct threats	Threats are often designed to isolate and silence you before any formal attack.	Save screenshots, preserve phone logs, tell a trusted contact, and do not engage alone.
Family pressure inside the country	Regimes often punish relatives when they cannot reach the activist abroad.	Create a family safety plan and avoid public details that increase risk to relatives.
Suspicious surveillance	Repeated unknown vehicles, people photographing events, or unusual questions may indicate monitoring.	Document patterns, vary routines, and report to host-country authorities if credible.
Digital compromise	Account takeovers, phishing, spyware links, or impersonation can expose networks.	Change passwords, enable 2FA, preserve evidence, and contact digital security support.
Legal harassment	Interpol abuse, lawsuits, extradition threats, or consular pressure may be used to intimidate.	Consult qualified counsel and notify trusted international partners early.
Smear campaigns	Defamation prepares the ground for isolation, legal action, or physical threats.	Document narratives and prepare a disciplined public response.

3. Use the WLC 5-step response method

1. Assess the risk

Ask: Is there an immediate physical threat? Is my family at risk? Is the threat online, legal, financial, or physical? Does the person making the threat have links to the regime? What evidence exists?

2. Preserve evidence

Do not delete messages, emails, calls, posts, images, or suspicious files. Take screenshots with date and time. Save URLs. Record who saw the threat. Store evidence in a secure folder with restricted access.

3. Protect people first

Before going public, protect the person targeted, their family, colleagues, and sources. Update passwords, review travel plans, reduce public location-sharing, and create a check-in protocol.

4. Report through the right channel

Depending on the threat, report to host-country police, digital security responders, legal counsel, platform trust and safety teams, immigration/asylum counsel, embassies, or human rights organizations.

5. Convert the incident into pressure

If safe, use the incident to expose the regime's pattern. Link it to other cases. Prepare a one-page brief for legislators, journalists, and international partners. Ask for specific action, not generic sympathy.

4. The 72-hour emergency protocol

Time window	Priority	Actions	Do not do this
0-3 hours	Safety	Confirm facts; check physical safety; contact a trusted person; secure devices; pause unnecessary communication.	Do not post publicly before verifying risk.
3-12 hours	Evidence	Save screenshots; export messages; log dates and names; identify witnesses; preserve URLs.	Do not edit or crop original evidence.
12-24 hours	Support	Contact legal counsel, digital security help, family support, WLC Regional Secretary, and host-country authorities if needed.	Do not handle the case alone.
24-48 hours	Narrative	Draft a short factual statement; identify the regime pattern; define a clear ask.	Do not exaggerate or speculate.
48-72 hours	Pressure	Brief allies, legislators, journalists, protection organizations, or international mechanisms as appropriate.	Do not expose names or family details unnecessarily.

5. Create a personal safety plan

- Choose two trusted contacts: one inside your movement and one outside it.
- Create a simple check-in routine: daily, weekly, or before/after public events.
- Prepare an emergency message that means "I need help" without explaining details.

- Keep copies of important documents in a secure place: ID, immigration papers, legal filings, and emergency contacts.
- Avoid predictable public routines after threats escalate.
- Separate public activism accounts from private family accounts.
- Review who can see your location, photos, contacts, and calendar.
- Know the local emergency number and how to file a police report in your host country.

6. Build a family protection plan

Many authoritarian regimes cannot reach the activist abroad directly, so they threaten relatives inside the country. A family protection plan should be built before a public campaign or testimony.

- Ask family members what level of public exposure they can tolerate.
- Avoid naming relatives publicly unless they consent and understand the risk.
- Prepare a communication plan if police or regime agents visit the family.
- Create a secure way for relatives to communicate urgent information.
- Document family intimidation as part of the transnational repression pattern.
- Do not pressure relatives to become public activists if they are not safe.

7. How to write a one-page incident brief

A good brief is short, factual, and useful to decision-makers. It should not read like a long denunciation. It should help an ally act.

- Title: “Transnational Repression Incident: [Country / Target / Date]”.
- Two-sentence summary: what happened and why it matters.
- Target profile: role, country of origin, current host country, risk level.
- Incident details: date, location, method, perpetrator if known, evidence available.
- Pattern: link to previous threats, family intimidation, legal harassment, or digital attacks.
- Requested action: police protection, public statement, visa support, sanctions review, platform escalation, parliamentary question, or urgent appeal.
- Contact: one secure point of contact, not a long list of people.

8. The role of the WLC

WLC should act as connective tissue, not as a substitute for local legal counsel or host-country authorities. WLC can help members document incidents, route cases to trusted partners, activate peer support, coordinate public messaging, and connect cases to broader advocacy on political prisoners, exile, statelessness, and authoritarian collaboration.

- Notify your Regional Secretary or designated WLC contact when a credible threat occurs.
- Use WLC channels for peer learning: what happened in one country can help protect activists in another.
- Ask WLC for help turning an incident into a clear advocacy ask.
- Request digital security support if devices or accounts are compromised.
- Document lessons safely so the Playbook can improve without exposing victims.

9. Common mistakes to avoid

- Treating online threats as harmless until they become physical.
- Posting details before assessing risk to family members.
- Deleting evidence out of fear or anger.
- Arguing directly with suspected regime accounts.
- Assuming host-country police already understand transnational repression.
- Letting one person carry the emotional and operational burden alone.
- Exposing sensitive evidence publicly when it would be more useful legally or diplomatically.

- Confusing visibility with protection. Sometimes visibility helps; sometimes it increases risk.

Selected practical resources

Use these resources as starting points. Always adapt them to local risk, language, and legal context. Do not upload sensitive case material to any platform unless the security protocol has been approved.

- **Freedom House Transnational Repression Project:** Reports, database, and policy analysis on how regimes target exiles and diasporas. [Link](#)
- **Access Now Digital Security Helpline:** Free technical assistance for civil society, journalists, activists, and human rights defenders. [Link](#)
- **EFF Surveillance Self-Defense:** Practical guides on threat modeling, secure communication, and surveillance risks. [Link](#)
- **Security in-a-Box:** Digital security guide for activists and human rights defenders. [Link](#)
- **Front Line Defenders:** Protection support and resources for human rights defenders at risk. [Link](#)

Final reminder

Remember: Transnational repression is designed to make activists feel alone. The first act of resistance is to break isolation: document, protect, report, and connect.