



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

August 2023

# TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Abraham Cooper  
*Chair*

Frederick A. Davie  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

David Curry

Susie Gelman

Mohamed Magid

Stephen Schneck

Nury Turkel

Eric Ueland

Frank Wolf

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

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*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

On May 10, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a [virtual hearing](#) on transnational repression (TNR) and freedom of religion or belief. The hearing, led by USCIRF's Chair [Nury Turkel](#), convened an array of witnesses who spoke to ongoing examples of TNR against religious minorities and dissidents, and U.S. policy on combating this repression.

In recorded remarks, Senator [Jeff Merkley](#) opened the hearing by raising concerns about "authoritarian governments reaching beyond their borders to silence the voices of the dissident diaspora and religious minorities." He mentioned China's harassment of Uyghurs, including in the United States, as well as TNR by Iran, Belarus, and Russia. Senator Merkley also noted TNR by U.S. partners like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, including on U.S. soil. He called for passage of the bipartisan [Transnational Repression Policy Act](#) to address the pernicious effects of TNR on freedom of religion or belief.

In his introductory remarks, Chair Turkel highlighted the increasing frequency of TNR, particularly against religious minorities. He noted with concern that "religious freedom violations no longer stop at state borders," raising alarm over TNR conducted by foreign governments in the United States. He called on Congress and the administration to "respond forcefully" to attempts to violate the fundamental freedom of religion or belief across state borders.

Commissioner [Eric Ueland](#) echoed Chair Turkel's concerns over TNR. He highlighted S. 831, the bipartisan Transnational Repression Policy Act, which he hoped would "serve as the foundation of a unified U.S. strategy to stem the tide of transnational repression and hold governments that engage in it accountable." Commissioner Ueland also recommended that the United States work multilaterally with other governments in the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance ([IRFBA](#)) to stem the tide of TNR. Commissioner Ueland also expressed concern about the promulgation of harmful tropes within a country - notably antisemitic blood libel tropes - as having negative implications on populations abroad. He condemned blood libel and other antisemitic speech as "never acceptable." He concluded by recommending that the U.S. government work to close loopholes that incentivize U.S. businesses to be complicit in TNR, including in the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

[Scott Busby](#), Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the U.S. Department of State, provided an overview of the four-pronged strategy the U.S. government is taking to combat TNR. These prongs include 1) coordination across U.S. government agencies, 2) education of U.S. government officials on TNR, 3) ensuring accountability and ensuring deterrence of TNR, and

4) bolstering resilience to counter the threat of TNR. In response to a question by Chair Turkel regarding China's sanctioning of USCIRF Commissioners and other forms of TNR, DAS Busby noted that the U.S. government continues to collect evidence about those responsible for these actions. He also noted the existence of "transnational repression road shows" where the United States informs other countries of TNR taking place on their soil. Responding to a question by Commissioner Davie about China's relationships with American colleges and universities, DAS Busby noted that the U.S. government continues to track that issue and push back when individual students are affected. In response to a question by Commissioner Schneck about U.S. leadership of multilateral efforts to combat transnational repression, DAS Busby highlighted the role of information sharing and continued engagement. Commissioner Ueland, in his comments, encouraged the State Department to coordinate closely with Congress to develop laws and policies related to combatting TNR.

[\*Andrea Prasow\*](#), Executive Director of The Freedom Initiative, noted that authoritarian governments that use TNR "view free religious expression as a threat, whether at home or abroad." She raised concern over cases of TNR by the governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia and urged "stronger legislation to define, criminalize, and punish" TNR. Prasow expressed support for S. 831, called for an interagency task force on TNR, and urged Congress and the Biden administration to call out cases of TNR.

[\*Nate Schenkkan\*](#), Senior Director of Research at Freedom House, highlighted the organization's global dataset on TNR. The dataset indicates that 35 percent of transnational repression cases have a religious character. Schenkkan focused his comments on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, noting that Tajikistan has pursued religious opponents abroad through INTERPOL and has illegally rendered citizens from Russia. Uzbekistan has also illegally rendered citizens, and in 2020, the government illegally rendered a citizen from Ukraine. Schenkkan recommended a whole of government approach to TNR. He argued that "the best protection for individuals against transnational repression is to have authorized legal status to reside within a strong democracy like the United States."

[\*Teng Biao\*](#), a Chinese lawyer and human rights activist, focused his comments on China's TNR. He elucidated cases of visa denial and expulsion; disinvitation, cancellation, and censorship; informants and spying;

economic coercion; sanctions; lawfare; interruption, humiliation, and intimidation; break-in, theft, and sabotage; hostage-taking and collective punishment; physical attacks; criminal detention; abduction; torture; assassination and murder; and Chinese institutions that threaten religious freedom and free speech. Dr. Biao cautioned that many in the West "do not realize the extent to which China has infiltrated not only their academic lives but in their everyday [lives as well]." He called for a greater awareness by international institutions of China's activities and urged further research into them.

[\*Marcus Michaelsen\*](#), a Senior Researcher at Citizen Lab, explained that digital technologies are a key element of all forms of TNR, emphasized that digital TNR can have deep and often very disturbing impacts, and stressed that digital TNR clearly interferes with the fundamental and human rights of those targeted. Michaelsen highlighted the plight of Uyghur Muslims, Baha'is, Iranian protestors, and Saudi women who have protested male guardianship laws. He argued that liberal democracies must work together to counter the authoritarian practices of digital TNR. Michaelsen urged governments to counter the proliferation of surveillance technologies, strengthen the digital resilience of civil society, and improve reporting and remedy mechanisms when TNR occurs.

[\*Julie Millsap\*](#), Government Relations Manager at the Uyghur Human Rights Project, discussed China's use of TNR to target those speaking out against the Uyghur genocide. She highlighted the cases of Kalbinur Ghani, Gulshan Abbas, and Ayschem Turkel, mother of USCIRF Chair Nury Turkel. Millsap shared her own experiences as well, noting Chinese government harassment and intimidation of her spouse's family in China in retaliation for her work in the United States on Uyghur issues. Millsap noted that harassment of Uyghurs overseas is a common phenomenon and shared research from the Uyghur Human Rights Project to this effect. She urged the U.S. government to encourage allies to adopt legislation similar to the Anti Social CCP Act and the Transnational Repression Policy Act. She also urged federal agencies to prioritize acquisition of personnel with Uyghur language skills, training for agents and tip line operators, and effective communication about what actions the government is taking in response to reports of TNR from the community.

Chair Turkel concluded by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.



## Professional Staff

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**Michael Ardovino**

*Policy Analyst*

**Danielle Ashbahian**

*Chief of Public Affairs*

**Keely Bakken**

*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**

*Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**

*Researcher*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**

*Director of Research & Policy*

**Mingzhi Chen**

*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Patrick Greenwalt**

*Policy Analyst*

**Sema Hasan**

*Policy Analyst*

**Thomas Kraemer**

*Chief Administrative Officer*

**Veronica McCarthy**

*Public Affairs Associate*

**Hilary Miller**

*Researcher*

**Nora Morton**

*Operations Specialist*

**Dylan Schexneydre**

*Researcher*

**Jamie Staley**

*Supervisory Policy Advisor*

**Scott Weiner**

*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Kurt Werthmuller**

*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Luke Wilson**

*Researcher*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.