



open briefing

Rethinking international relocation

A strategy of last resort
and strengthening support
for activists in exile



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Open Briefing builds resistance and resilience among the people and movements challenging unaccountable power.

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Introduction

The scramble to evacuate Afghan partners as the Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021 was a watershed moment for the protection ecosystem. The threat the militant group posed to human rights defenders and other civic actors in Afghanistan was significant and imminent. Specialists from protection organisations such as Open Briefing and informal networks of veterans and private security companies worked tirelessly alongside the official airlift. So too did the staff and volunteers of many international nonprofits and foundations - most of whom had never before managed security crises or evacuations. This massive effort undoubtedly saved many hundreds of lives.

The trend had begun during the coup in Myanmar a few months earlier and was further cemented during the invasion of Ukraine the following year, but the scale of the Afghan evacuations left a lasting impact. It has broadened the range of international partners now responding to threats against activists and deepened their reliance on international relocation. This is taking place against a backdrop of shrinking civic space and increasing attacks and reprisals against human rights defenders and other civic actors, leading to ever greater calls for assistance.

International relocation is beset by its own difficulties, but this trend is creating two wider challenges. Firstly, by resorting to relocation more frequently, we are increasing the numbers of activists in exile without the mechanisms to properly support them over the long term. Secondly, we risk undermining social movements and facilitating collective relocation to the point of creating whole civil societies in exile.

Drawing on the feedback of activists in exile and based on Open Briefing's extensive experience of working with activists and organisations before, during, and after international relocation, we argue that it should usually only be considered after other options in the 'protection continuum' have been fully explored. Instead, by properly understanding and managing risk, we can co-design support mechanisms that allow activism to be sustained within a country, wherever possible.

When the threat becomes so great that international relocation is necessary to ensure an activist's safety, we need to look beyond the immediate crisis phase and address the residual physical security risks and the longer-term threats to wellbeing and digital safety that arise when relocation is not complemented by suitable ongoing support.

Spotlight

A lawyer in Bangladesh

A lawyer in Bangladesh sought our help after being attacked and targeted with death threats for defending LGBTQIA+ rights. Open Briefing worked with them to review past incidents, identify key vulnerabilities, and create tailored security plans. At their request, we also shared our threat assessment with several organisations supporting LGBTQIA+ defenders, allowing them to enhance their local support. Additionally, we helped the lawyer to secure a place on a European respite programme, providing them with a safe space to reflect and plan, before returning home re-energised to continue their vital work.



The Protection Continuum

Brave people and movements around the world have the answers to social injustice, democratic backsliding, and the climate crisis. But repressive governments, corrupt corporations, and armed groups are using violence and oppression to silence them. These adversaries seek to grind activists down and force them to give up or flee for their safety.

Open Briefing counters this by co-designing strategies to make successful attacks much harder and by building up the capacity of activists and organisations to bounce back should they be targeted. In this way, we help them to remain in the struggle for human rights and social justice in their country for as long as is safely possible. This is particularly important for those defending indigenous and community lands, for example, as their sustained physical presence is so vital to their success.

We view international relocation as one tool in a wider spectrum of possible support. This protection continuum runs through holistic security risk management, collective protection, solidarity and advocacy, protective accompaniment, international respite, and domestic relocation, before considering international relocation options. The further along the continuum we go, the greater the impact on the activist and their family or community, and the greater the resources required.



HOLISTIC SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT

The first step is to properly understand the risks arising from an activist’s profile and characteristics, their mission and adversaries, and the context in which they live and work (what we call Person, Purpose, Place). We must also consider their available allies, resources, and capabilities. We can then co-design targeted security measures and contingency plans and provide training and knowledge sharing to build up their physical, digital, and psychosocial security. This ‘holistic security’ might cover one or more of the following areas of concern set out in the table below.¹

A holistic security approach can usually reduce the risks to a level where they can safely continue their work. However, sometimes additional strategies must be considered.

“Open Briefing helped me understand the threats I face in my complex security situation. We collaboratively developed strategies to improve my physical and digital security and personal wellbeing. This enabled me to make practical decisions around my security and resilience, while continuing to advocate for the human rights of women in a difficult and high-risk environment.”

Human rights defender in Afghanistan

PROTECTION	DIGITAL	WELLBEING
Personal security	Information security	Physical wellbeing
Building security	Device security	Mental wellbeing
Organisational security	Account security	Financial wellbeing
Travel security	Network security	Social wellbeing
Vehicle and asset security	Communication security	Spiritual wellbeing
Partner security	Website security	Digital wellbeing

Table 1. Holistic security.

Spotlight

An investigative journalist in Rwanda

A Rwandan investigative journalist was arrested, tortured, and raped by police after being accused of sedition for reporting on the murder of a senior army officer. After a source and others close to her were killed, she fled to Uganda in fear for her life. Impoverished and in emotional distress, she contacted Open Briefing when other organisations could not provide appropriate support. Our team helped to secure emergency grants for her immediate needs, provided ongoing counselling, and coordinated with an organisation that could support her resettlement. She is now rebuilding her life in Canada and told us, "Open Briefing helped me when no other organisation could. I had lost hope, but your support saved my life."

COLLECTIVE PROTECTION

When working with social movements and indigenous communities in particular, a collective protection approach can be very effective. This is a way of approaching risk analysis and protection planning through the lens of a community, rather than through that of an individual activist. This approach recognises that the security of defenders is interconnected with the security of those in their network - be they family, friends, neighbours, or colleagues.

No one model of collective protection can be applied as a blanket solution, but there are common elements that can be used to structure thinking and planning around collective protection for any group. These include:²

- 1 Define the collective.
- 2 Conduct consultations with the collective.
- 3 Strengthen relationships within the collective.
- 4 Analyse the collective threats.
- 5 Create and implement a collective protection strategy.
- 6 Regularly monitor and refine the strategy.

SOLIDARITY AND ADVOCACY

Although the foundation of the protection continuum is holistic security risk management, complementary support across the legal, financial, media, and political spheres can be essential for success. Access to a wider ecosystem of allies and resources at the national, regional, and international levels both plays an important practical role and can counter the isolation and helplessness caused by repeated attacks and reprisals. When appropriate, making this support highly visible or running public advocacy campaigns may help to deter further attacks.

PROTECTIVE ACCOMPANIMENT

Protective accompaniment is a form of unarmed civilian protection that involves deploying specially-trained teams of volunteers to act in solidarity with threatened human rights defenders and communities on the ground. Pioneered by Peace Brigades International, the presence of international volunteers significantly raises the stakes for adversaries. This is particularly effective when adversaries are vulnerable to the implied threat of diplomatic and economic responses to any attacks. The protective presence of volunteers can also provide essential moral support to those under threat, giving them greater confidence to continue their work.

INTERNATIONAL RESPITE

Fellowships, shelter cities, and other international rest and respite programmes are an important tool when the threats to an activist's safety or wellbeing can be best addressed by temporarily removing them from the immediate danger. As well as providing respite and solidarity, many of these programmes use the time - usually three months - to offer tailored support and capacity sharing to ensure that the risks can be more-effectively managed when the activist returns home.

Spotlight

Shrinking civic space

Global freedom declined for the 18th year in a row in 2023,³ with only 2.1% of the world's population living in countries where civic space is open.⁴ Against this backdrop, at least 300 human rights defenders⁵ and 89 journalists and media workers⁶ were killed, and Open Briefing reported a 40% increase in requests for security and wellbeing support.⁷ It is unsurprising that concern for personal safety is the main reason that many human rights defenders and other civic actors are forced into exile.⁸

DOMESTIC RELOCATION

Depending on the adversary and threat, it may be effective to move home or office nearby or to relocate to another part of the country. This can be particularly effective in the face of cartel violence, threats from organised criminal gangs, security crackdowns, or other threats tied to particular locations. These moves can be temporary or permanent, and overt or covert - the latter requiring careful planning and may involve building networks of trusted allies and safe houses.

INTERNATIONAL RELOCATION

Occasionally, the nature and severity of the threat to an activist's personal safety may be too great to manage using the above strategies. At this point, international relocation may be considered; however, it is not a panacea and can be the hardest strategy to implement successfully. Relocation may be to a neighbouring country, such as from Myanmar to Thailand or from Afghanistan to Pakistan, or to another part of the world, such as through the Canadian resettlement programme. The safe and legal routes can be limited and bureaucratic, but other routes - sometimes involving people smugglers - can be dangerous and result in deportation or being stuck in limbo, including in refugee camps.



Supporting Activists in Exile

Even if initially successful, the long-term sustainability of relocating an activist will depend on the support that is available to help them rebuild their lives and address the ongoing threats to them and their colleagues and family members that remain at home. Permanent international relocation, which is often seen as the safest option in terms of physical risk, can present significant challenges arising from:

- 1 New or residual threats to the physical safety of those relocated.
- 2 Threats to the safety and wellbeing of colleagues and family members at home.
- 3 Threats to the wellbeing of activists in exile.
- 4 Information security threats to movements.

Spotlight

A human rights defender in Guatemala

A human rights defender was targeted by the government for exposing abuses of power. After they sought political asylum in the United States, Open Briefing provided crisis management, security advice, and wellbeing support. We helped them to adjust to their new life despite language and cultural barriers and limited resources. Through counselling, we helped them to process their experiences of persecution and manage ongoing anxiety about threats to their family. The defender now continues their work in exile, fighting injustice and sharing their legal expertise with others at risk in Guatemala.

ADDRESSING THREATS TO SAFETY

International relocation is not without physical risks. Crossing a border while leaving the home country is a common risk 'pinch point', particularly for those under surveillance. Travelling outside safe and legal routes is sometimes necessary, but can be dangerous and result in deportation or being stuck in limbo. Even once safely relocated, physical risks can include anti-immigrant and far-right violence from members of the host population or death threats and assassination by agents or proxies of their home state, particularly in the case of political dissidents. Adversaries may also target colleagues or family members at home in order to maintain pressure on those who have relocated.

Open Briefing would address such threats to physical safety through the various strategies in the protection continuum mentioned earlier. This means that international relocation often only changes the nature of the physical threats that we are addressing rather than removing them completely.

FOSTERING WELLBEING

The fear of ongoing attacks or the threat of reprisals against colleagues or family members at home are significant sources of stress and anxiety for activists in exile. That there are still activists facing danger at home while the relocated person lives in relative safety can lead to survivor's guilt. Some may be living with grief and trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as a result of being targeted or losing people close to them. For some, difficulties accepting that they may never return home can make them less able to adapt to their new context. And cultural isolation and financial challenges can further undermine wellbeing, with many activists in exile reporting suicidal thoughts. It is worth remembering that the wellbeing of colleagues and family members at home will also likely be negatively impacted by the relocation of a friend or loved one.

Timely access to high-quality psychosocial support is essential to addressing the threat to the wellbeing of activists in exile. They may also need specialist mental health support. For example, Open Briefing's team of counsellors and psychologists offers a range of counselling and psychotherapy services in multiple languages, including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR), art therapy, and psychoeducation. We are also adopting a range of culturally-sensitive interventions and approaches that recognise the central importance of the collective in wellbeing for many peoples.

This can be complemented by peer support groups and community groups, particularly those that can help with legal and financial challenges. In the longer term, helping activists in exile to find a meaningful way to continue their activism from their new home will provide the renewed sense of purpose that is essential to rebuilding and maintaining their wellbeing.

COUNTERING THE DIGITAL THREAT

Often overlooked following international relocation are ongoing threats of physical and digital surveillance and other threats to information security and digital resilience. While the initial cost of relocating an activist at risk may seem economically appealing, the true cost of managing the risk to them and the wider movement over time may be significant when these factors are considered.

Activists in exile may be high profile and well trusted within diaspora activist networks and by those at home. They may become central nodes for the sharing of connections and information within social movements, making them highly-valuable sources of intelligence for adversaries or inadvertent conduits to further compromise communities or groups. They may also become easier to target as they naturally let their guard down once the immediate physical dangers are removed.

Sophisticated state adversaries are likely to be able to compromise private communications using surveillance and intrusion technologies (including Pegasus and the like) and to undertake remote surveillance using mobile and telephone networks. Such adversaries will likely leave no trace of this monitoring, which enables them to continue to mine the intelligence for years. While accessing information or location data may be a goal for some adversaries, these approaches may be augmented with more-traditional surveillance techniques, entrapment, or intimidation in order to produce a chilling effect or to undermine the wellbeing of activists after they have fled.

Open Briefing's strategy to counter this involves:

- 1 Raising awareness among activists and donors of the ongoing information security threat to activists in exile.
- 2 Providing technical support, capacity sharing, and mentoring directly to high-risk activists in exile.
- 3 Contributing to the building up of collective digital security capabilities within social movements through workshops and resources.



Conclusion

Although the additional attention being devoted to the safety and wellbeing of activists and organisations is welcome, it is crucial that these efforts are channelled in the right direction. The challenges of international relocation and the existence of other options in the protection continuum should make it a strategy of last - not first - resort.

By employing a number of approaches, ranging from holistic security risk management to domestic relocation, we can safely manage risks and keep activists in the struggle for human rights and social justice in their countries. To not do so risks undermining social movements and creating whole civil societies in exile.

Even when the threat becomes so great that international relocation becomes necessary to protect an activist, it should be viewed as only the first step towards safety. We need to look beyond the immediate crisis phase and address the residual physical security risks. We also need to address the longer-term threats to wellbeing and digital safety that arise when relocation is not complemented by suitable ongoing support.

Protecting human rights defenders and other civic actors at risk demands comprehensive strategies that go beyond relocation. By addressing risks and providing ongoing support, we can empower activists to continue their vital work, even in the most challenging circumstances.

“Open Briefing has stood by us, offering bespoke services that have enabled us to carry out our mandate with confidence. Their support has given us the peace of mind necessary to operate fearlessly and effectively.”

Environmental activist in Kenya

Endnotes

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People and communities
around the world have the solutions
to social injustice, authoritarianism, and the
climate crisis. But repressive governments, corrupt
corporations, and armed groups use violence and
oppression to try and silence them.

By building resistance and resilience among those challenging
unaccountable power, Open Briefing supports a shared vision
for a world where communities and ecosystems can thrive.

We join forces with grassroots activists, movements, and donors at risk.
Together, we strengthen their protection and security, digital resilience,
and wellbeing and belonging, so they can continue their vital work.
Alongside this, our professional consultancy and advisory services
allow us operate at every level of civil society, from the
grassroots to the global.

We come with questions, not answers. Listening to the
knowledge and experiences of the people we support
before sharing our own. You know how to
change the world; Open Briefing knows
how to keep you safe.



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