PUBLIC AFFAIRS

"I Can Do Good Work—If I Don't Get Killed"

Activists and dissidents come to Canada to escape imprisonment or assassination. But the government doesn't take their safety seriously

BY MEGHAN DAVIDSON LADLY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUANE COLE

When Lateef Johar arrived in Canada nine years ago, he had only a basic command of English and spoke no French. Now thirty-five and based in Toronto, Johar has built up a small community of friends in whose company he can feel at ease. But his social media accounts are frequently subject to trolling. There have been periods over the past nine years when he hasn't felt safe sleeping in his own bed.

Johar grew up in the Pakistani province of Balochistan. His village, a few hours' drive from Karachi, had a population of a few hundred, and most families engaged in subsistence farming. There was no middle school, no high school, no hospital, no internet, and no electricity.

Away for high school in the early 2000s in Awaran, the main city in his district, Johar joined BSO-Azad, an offshoot of the Baloch Students Organization, which advocates for an independent Balochistan (Azad means "free" in Urdu and Balochi). In 2013, Pakistan banned BSO-Azad, labelling it a terrorist organization. In March 2014, BSO-Azad chairperson Zahid Baloch was abducted at gunpoint in Quetta, the provincial capital. (Many Pakistanis of Baloch ethnicity choose to use Baloch as a last name to signify their pride in their people and solidarity with their struggle for autonomy.) The kidnappers were unknown, but BSO-Azad believed them to be affiliated with the Pakistani military, based on previous threats. The military has denied any involvement.

To protest Zahid's disappearance, BSO-Azad organized a hunger strike. Johar spent forty-six days camped outside the Karachi Press Club, subsisting on fluids. He ended his strike after the Asian Human Rights Commission committed to taking the alleged kidnapping case to the United Nations International Commission for Missing Persons.

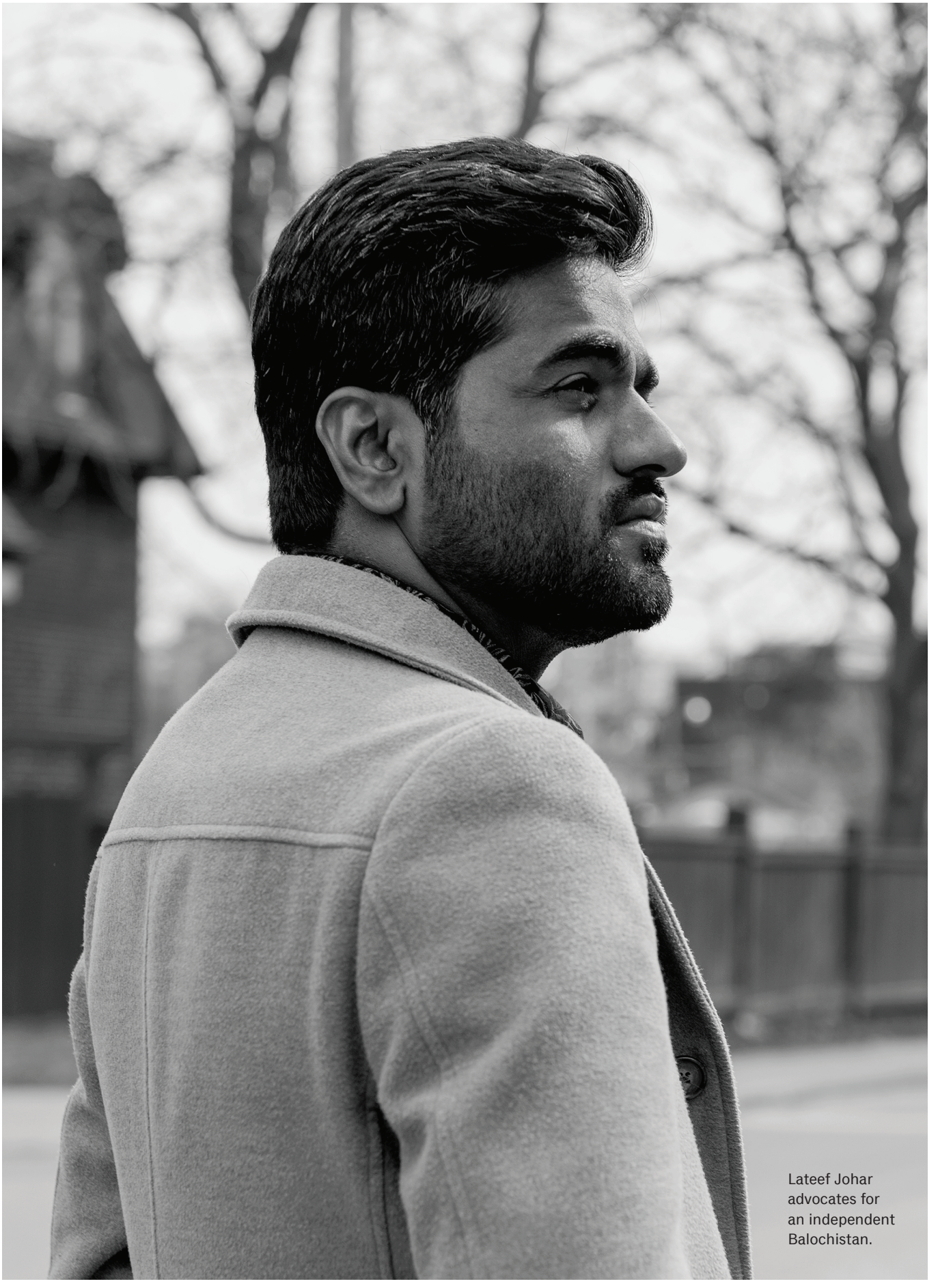
The hunger strike made Johar a publicly recognizable figure, and he no longer felt safe in Pakistan. Friends suggested he apply for asylum abroad. He spent a few months in the United Arab Emirates and a month in Nepal, applying for refugee status in Canada after friends cited the country's reputation for welcoming immigrants and championing human rights. Johar arrived in Toronto in September 2015.

One of the friends he left behind was Karima Mehrab, a fellow BSO-Azad activist who had witnessed Zahid Baloch's abduction and, in the aftermath, taken her friend's place as the organization's chairperson. In November 2015, Mehrab fled terrorism charges and death threats. Veteran politician Bob Rae, then working at law firm Olthuis Kleer Townshend LLP, supported her application, and she soon joined Johar in Toronto.

For Johar, reuniting with Mehrab in their disorienting new landscape was like having a piece of his familiar world returned. Neither of them, however, truly left Balochistan behind when they emigrated, and the pull of their activism complicated their lives in exile.

For dissidents who flee their authoritarian home countries, there is often no true refuge. States like Pakistan target political activists who seek asylum abroad, silencing them through means ranging from verbal threats and intimidation to physical violence. And some host countries do little to stop them.

"My frustration is that the Canadian government is completely ignoring the issue," says Johar. "Governments all around the world—US and UK—take these kinds of things very seriously, but the Canadian government seems like it is doing nothing. And Pakistan is taking opportunities. They approach any person in Canada that says a word about Balochistan, and it's scary."



Lateef Johar advocates for an independent Balochistan.

Bordering Iran to the west and Afghanistan to the north and northwest, Balochistan is geographically the largest of all of Pakistan's provinces and also the most sparsely populated. The Baloch people trace their lineage back to Iran, though most reside in Pakistan, where they make up just under 6 percent of the population. They speak Balochi, a northwestern Iranian language, whereas the majority of Pakistanis speak Urdu or a dialect of Punjabi or Sindhi and trace their ancestry to India. While most Baloch identify as Sunni, community leaders often assert that their people are ultimately secular in their outlook, with ethnicity and tribal affiliation trumping religion. There is a cultural importance placed on hospitality and acceptance of minorities that extends to religious pluralism. Across south and western Asia, there are small numbers of Shia, Zikri, Hindu, and Sikh Baloch. The insurgency movement in Johar's home province goes back to the partition of India, in 1947, when part of the territory that is now Pakistani Balochistan—specifically what was the princely state of Kalat under British colonial India—briefly declared independence before joining Pakistan, a decision that remains contested.

There have been various waves of Baloch separatist violence since then, with the current insurgency beginning around 2004. (Tensions were inflamed this past January, when Iran and Pakistan exchanged airstrikes to target Baloch militants in both countries.)

Balochistan has the highest poverty rate and the lowest literacy rate of any of Pakistan's provinces, yet it contains vast reserves of copper, gold, and natural gas—among the largest in Asia. Several large infrastructure projects in the province use outside labour. An example is the key port of Gwadar, which the government leased to Chinese management in 2013. Baloch activists assert that their people have been neglected and denied jobs, educational opportunities, and federal royalties for resources in their province, rendering them an underclass.

Human rights groups have documented the military's systemic abuse of Baloch activists over the past two decades, with an entire generation of Baloch affected by widespread torture, imprisonment, and disappearances. Pakistan's Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances reported working on 10,078 cases of enforced disappearances between March 2011—when it was formed—and January 2024. (Established by the state, the commission, whose work is ongoing, has traced only about a third of the reported cases and, in most situations, no one has been held accountable.) While Baloch individuals are regularly picked up in other provinces, 2,752 of those cases hail from Balochistan. Activists maintain the numbers of the disappeared are much higher.

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has voiced grave concern about widespread enforced disappearances in Pakistan. There is a recent trend in which activists, journalists, or others perceived as anti-state have allegedly been kidnapped, secretly detained, interrogated and tortured, and then released after a few weeks or months without charges.

Some Baloch separatists have been accused of human rights violations and indiscriminate violence. Over the past decade, a branch of the Balochistan Liberation Army—one of the province's main separatist groups—has deployed suicide bombers. Pakistan, the UK, and the US have declared the BLA a terrorist organization. This designation, and local allegations of terrorism—often lodged against ordinary activists as a means of intimidation—can complicate the cases of Baloch asylum seekers abroad, even if they are not affiliated with the BLA.

In exile, many Baloch activists have formed a global network. They persist in agitating for change back home even as they settle into the reality that they will most likely never be able to return there. Many of them become the targets of transnational repression, which the non-profit organization Freedom House defines as governments' use of violence and intimidation tactics to try to silence dissidents in the diaspora. In a 2021 report, the organization documented 608 such cases globally between 2014 and 2020; Pakistan is listed among the perpetrators. The figure is probably an underestimation: the report states that "even this conservative enumeration shows that what often appear to be isolated incidents—an assassination here, a kidnapping there—in fact represent a pernicious and pervasive threat to human freedom and security."

Certain high-profile actions by state agents do garner global attention, as in Saudi agents' reported murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and the 2023 killing of Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey, BC, which the Canadian government has alleged was ordered by India. The federal government launched an inquiry into foreign interference in September 2023. That month, US authorities raised their concerns with the Indian government after thwarting a plot to kill a Sikh separatist on US soil. In January, the US Department of Justice charged two Canadian Hells Angels members who were allegedly hired by Iran's intelligence service to assassinate a man and a woman in Maryland. But even with more subtle operations that escape widespread media attention, there are wider repercussions. The targets—human rights activists, journalists, satirists, and others—are sent a message that they are not safe anywhere.

Transnational repression is a national security threat that often goes unacknowledged publicly within Canada. "It's no secret that there is foreign interference by countries and governments targeting their expatriate communities," says retired Canadian Security Intelligence Service officer Alan Treddenick. Multiple countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, China, and Russia, are well-known actors within Canada. But the Baloch movement is relatively lesser known globally, and the numbers of Baloch within Canada are small, perhaps a few hundred. Not all of them are activists. Many vocal critics of the Pakistani state reside in Europe and the UK. And while Pakistan has been flagged for instances of transnational repression involving other exiled communities elsewhere, in Canada, it is not viewed as a major instigator.

ABOVE
Johar and Karima Mehrab in Awaran, Balochistan, in 2014.

Risk consultant Calvin Chrustie, a former operations officer with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, believes rogue states are becoming more brazen: while recruiting individuals to target their nationals living in Canada may have once been taboo, that is no longer the case. Over the past decade, various kidnapping plots by foreign states on Canadian soil have become public knowledge. Saudi operatives are accused of spying and plotting to harm Quebec-based dissident Omar Abdulaziz as well as attempting to kidnap and assassinate Toronto-based former intelligence official Saad Aljabri. The Saudi regime has disavowed these charges.

In 2016, property developer Sam Mizrahi stated in an affidavit brought about by a lawsuit that CSIS had warned him of an Iranian scheme to abduct his former business partner, Mahmoud Reza Khavari. And in July 2021, media reported that four individuals with ties to Iranian intelligence had plotted to kidnap the journalist Masih Alinejad, a long-time critic of the regime, from her Brooklyn home and spirit her back to Iran via Venezuela. Alinejad, who fled Iran in 2009 and is now an American citizen, had been the target of an intense surveillance operation and social media harassment on behalf of Iran. US prosecutors said in an indictment pertaining to the case that the same Iranian agents had conducted similar surveillance of three Canadians who'd also been critical of the regime. The Iranian government denied all allegations.

While much less sensational than physical violence, the kind of remote repression that many Baloch exiles experience—through digital abuse or surveillance—has become by far the most common form of attack. A February 2024 report from the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders details several instances in which the Pakistani military has intimidated and detained members of Johar's family since he moved to Canada. Online trolling, threatening late-night phone calls to elderly parents, and invasions of privacy through spyware such as Pegasus all serve to isolate and strip targets of freedoms in their new homes. For a 2022 report, Citizen Lab—a cybersecurity watchdog organization affiliated with the University of Toronto—interviewed eighteen targets of remote transnational repression in Canada. The researchers found that the subjects' mental health, ability to engage with their home communities, and their activism had all been negatively affected.

Cases of digital repression are underreported, according to Yana Gorokhovskaia, research director for strategy and design at Freedom House, in part because online abuse can be difficult to trace back to its source. And Canada's efforts to prevent foreign interference often focus on what Gorokhovskaia refers to as traditional intelligence fare, such as protecting the intellectual property of technology and safeguarding elections. While CSIS handles individual cases, there is no overarching federal

PHOTO COURTESY OF LATEEF JOHAR

policy that addresses punitive measures against the perpetrators of transnational repression.

"What makes this sort of transnational repression insidious and challenging for governments to deal with is that it's outside of the traditional framework of national security," says Gorokhovskaia. "It is not really about collecting national secrets or collecting this kind of state information. It's about targeting individuals."

Given the nature of the threats they were fleeing, both Johar and Mehrab were assigned to CSIS agents upon their arrival in Canada. This is often the case for certain asylum seekers who might still face security threats abroad. At the time, Johar felt CSIS was more interested in investigating them for foreign connections—Mehrab in particular. Because she had been charged with terrorism in Pakistan for her activism, she was formally investigated for terrorist links during her application for permanent residency. But Mehrab's profile only grew as she attended conferences and protests. Johar helped found the Human Rights Council of Balochistan, a non-profit digital-based advocacy organization, and served for a time as its deputy coordinator. Over time, he says, CSIS seemed to take the threats against him and Mehrab more seriously.

Both would have known the dangers of continuing their activism abroad. In 2017, the Pakistani Baloch journalist and writer Sajid Hussain—co-founder, with one of Mehrab's brothers, Sameer, of the *Balochistan Times* website—sought asylum in Sweden while fleeing death threats. Sweden criminalizes "refugee espionage," where states illegally spy on their own exiled nationals, with the intention of seeking reprisals on foreign soil—a legal framework that activists want Canada to adopt. Hussain continued his activism as he settled into life abroad. In March 2020, he went missing; at the end of April, his body was found in the depths of the Fyris River.

On the day he disappeared, around 1,400 files were deleted from his laptop. His cellphone has never been recovered, and his body was found without shoes or a jacket. Swedish police ruled out foul play and attributed Hussain's death to drowning.

Hussain's friends and family are adamant that his death was not a suicide or an accident. But Steven Butler isn't quite as certain. "When people drown themselves, they often take off their shoes before—so that is one of the indications," says Butler, who was the Asia program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists at the time of Hussain's disappearance. He says there were a number of other factors that led him to believe it was a suicide. "Frankly what it really points to is that living in exile is no fun. Exile for journalists, for anyone, can just be very difficult."

> Mehrab's example has been used to instill fear: if exiles do not behave, they will never be able to return home—even after their death.

For Johar, Hussain's death was a seismic loss. It became clear that even in countries like Sweden, dissidents are not safe. Whether they're the targets of a state-sponsored assassination or they succumb to the devastating toll exile takes on mental health, the outcome remains the same.

The loss would have a profound echo later that year. On December 20, 2020, thirty-seven-year-old Mehrab took the fifteen-minute ferry to Toronto's Ward Island. She often went to the islands off the city's waterfront to destress. She was still receiving threats, including messages apparently sent from the WhatsApp account of one of her abducted friends that told her to return to Pakistan, that only then would terrorism charges against her be dropped and her friends and loved ones who had been abducted be released. In the weeks leading up to this December outing, the senders had been writing that they knew where she lived and where she took her nephew to play.

On that Sunday afternoon, she was preoccupied with things beyond her activism. An undergraduate student at the University of Toronto, she had an exam coming up. She and Johar had met on campus on Thursday and then spoken again Friday, both eager for the winter break. As she set out for Ward Island, she told her sister, Mahganj Baloch, who was in Pakistan, to stay awake and expect her call later that day. Karima wanted to show Mahganj the presents she had bought for her and the holiday decorations in her apartment.

Mehrab did not return to make that phone call. The following day, her body was recovered by Toronto Police from the waters off Centre Island.

If Mehrab's and Hussain's deaths weren't alarming enough, Salman Haider, a fellow exiled activist, had more reasons to fear for his life. He'd come to Canada in 2018 after having been abducted and detained in Pakistan the previous year. In January 2017, Haider had been driving home from his office in Islamabad, where he ran a theatre group, when two men in police uniforms signalled for him to stop. More men approached as he stopped and pulled him from his car. They blindfolded and handcuffed him and put him in the back seat of their car. For just shy of three weeks, he was held in a cell, a cloth bag over his head, and tortured. He realized, only from the cries of pain nearby, that two of his friends had been picked up too.

Haider, a poet, trained psychologist, and professor of gender studies, is Shia and not from Balochistan, but he helped run a satirical Facebook page, titled "Mochi," that was critical of Pakistan's military, including of its presence in Balochistan. After widespread protests over the men's disappearances, they were abruptly released. Though the Pakistani military repeatedly denied any involvement, Haider and

Ahmad Waqass Goraya, a blogger who was among those kidnapped, believe the Inter-Services Intelligence was responsible. (Three other men were also kidnapped, but they are not identified here due to security concerns.) While the men were missing, posts alleging their blogging was blasphemous began to circulate on pro-military social media accounts. Blasphemy is a firecracker allegation in Pakistan; it is legally punishable by death, and even those who are only accused—not convicted—of the charge often die as a result of mob violence and lynching.

When Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency received an application to file a formal case against the men, Haider felt he needed to get himself and his wife and then four-year-old son out of the country. (The FIA never registered the case; it conducted an inquiry and found no evidence of blasphemy.) Several months later, he had made his way to Canada and applied for asylum. Around the same time, Goraya and his family returned to the Netherlands, where Goraya had been living since 2007.

In 2018, a CSIS agent contacted Haider. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation had sent a dossier to multiple countries on three continents, informing local intelligence about a "kill list" originating from Pakistan that included fifteen activists—eleven men and four women—living abroad. Haider was one of them. The CSIS agent wanted to know who Haider felt would threaten him, and Haider said he was a critic of both the ISI and radical religious elements such as the Taliban. The CSIS agent told Haider to be careful and gave him a number to call if he felt concerned, but Haider later discovered the number was no longer in service.

Goraya, who routinely encounters online trolling by pro-military types and hate bots, deals with more substantial intimidation. In December 2018, a friend informed him he was on the same kill list as Haider. And in February 2021, Dutch authorities moved Goraya and his family to a safe house after a separate credible threat.

A few months later, Goraya would unknowingly evade another physical attack. In January 2022, supermarket employee Muhammad Gohir Khan was convicted in a British court of a conspiracy to murder for his role in a 2021 plot to kill Goraya. According to court documents, Khan, a UK citizen, had been in communication with a middleman known as Muzamil or MudZ on WhatsApp. Khan had travelled to Rotterdam but was unable to locate Goraya. He was apprehended upon his return to the UK.

During the case, Muzamil's identity was not disclosed, beyond that it is believed he is a British national living in Pakistan. It remains unknown who his client was. The British police have labelled the case an active investigation, and Pakistani authorities have denied any involvement. But Goraya is adamant that the ISI is behind his attempted assassination.

His friends in Canada haven't been afforded the same protection. In the summer of 2021, Goraya learned from a source in the Pakistani security services that Haider and Johar, among others, were named on a separate ISI "kill list." He told Johar, whose name and Toronto home address allegedly appeared on the leaked hit list. Johar reported the tip to his assigned CSIS agent but received little support from the organization in his panicked attempts to hide. He was on a student budget, and finding any housing at all was difficult. A quick move just wasn't feasible, nor did he want to temporarily stay with friends and risk endangering them.

When Haider found out about the kill list from Goraya, he realized he had no means of directly contacting CSIS with the update. Around that time, he was sure he was being followed. Johar told his agent that Haider needed to speak with a CSIS officer. In the course of researching and writing this article, I asked a CSIS contact to see if someone in the agency could reach out to Haider. The contact requested a follow-up for his case. But as of this writing, Haider had still not been in touch with anyone from CSIS.

Haider and his family have applied for Canadian citizenship. He is eager to expand his psychotherapy practice so that he can help immigrants affected by trauma. And he continues to be outspoken on X (formerly Twitter) about the political dynamics of Pakistan. But being abroad has also changed his activism—activism that he once risked his life for—and he feels his connection to new debates at home ebbing somewhat. "I think I will become irrelevant in four or five years," he said. "Through social media, you can remain in contact with these people. Other than that, you don't know anything."

Friends have told him that the Pakistani state continues to monitor dissidents for five to ten years after they have ceased their activism, and that for those who continue to speak out, the monitoring is lifelong. He looks over his shoulder as he goes about his day. He still feels scared sometimes. But not as scared as he was in Pakistan.

Shortly after Mehrab's death, Johar reached out to Jessica Bell, the member of provincial parliament for his riding of University-Rosedale. After meeting with him, she championed his concerns. "The police did not do a full investigation" into Mehrab's death, says Bell. "I think the larger issue is that Canada has a responsibility to ensure that political refugees are protected from harassment and threats."

In February 2021, in a statement to Ontario's legislative assembly, Bell called for an independent investigation into Mehrab's death. She also sent a letter to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland, the member of Parliament for the same riding, asking her to take various actions to support momentum around the case. Freeland did not respond to interview requests for this story, but her office confirmed it had been in touch with Johar directly. (Johar does not recall this.) Shortly after making her statements, Bell received a letter from the Pakistan consulate refuting some of her assertions pertaining to Mehrab and expressing concern that she was voicing support for the BLA, an organization with ties to extremism. The consulate did not respond to interview or fact-checking requests.

Johar was feeling depressed due to the lack of concrete action on Mehrab's

case. When he found out about the kill list, his morale sank even lower. Each level of law enforcement he spoke to in search of protection directed him elsewhere. Johar says the University of Toronto campus police were concerned he was risking his safety, and that of other students, by being on campus yet told him that he needed to reach out to Ontario Provincial Police for help with security. The OPP in turn told him to speak with CSIS. And beyond telling him to monitor his surroundings, his CSIS agent offered no practical protection.

CSIS lists a telephone number online and also provides an online form inviting those with concerns to report them. Unlike in the US, however, there is no outreach specifically for individuals who feel threatened due to transnational repression—Public Safety Canada directs people to foreign interference literature or to a listing of general service numbers. Immediate emergencies in Canada are directed to 911 services. And many dissidents may feel wary calling a general number to relay their concerns.

"The problem is so beyond the police; it's a culture of Canadians living in this bubble. We're arrogant and naive at the same time," says Chrustie. He says the judicial system in Canada is failing to protect Canadians from foreign threats. In the US and Australia, he says, government websites and policy papers publicize transnational threats. The FBI has public literature on transnational repression, as well as links to cases, available in over sixty languages. By contrast, he says, "the Canadian government is probably one of the worst governments in terms of educating the public."

Treddenick believes the country needs to develop a new national security strategy that takes foreign interference into account. He favours a foreign agent registry, similar to what is in place in the US and Australia. A 2023 Public Safety Canada consultation and a motion put forward by the federal opposition both call for such a registry. An October 2023 House of Commons committee report made twenty-two recommendations for substantial legislative change concerning foreign interference, including a registry. But unless a strategy revamp becomes a priority for the general public, there will likely be little political willpower to do so.

Toward the end of 2022, as news of China's alleged interference in the last two federal elections broke nationally, Canadians began to take notice of transnational repression. And there has been subsequent public acknowledgment that China has targeted various MPs, personally and through their families, for anti-China politics. In September, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Canadian intelligence had reported that Indian government agents were implicated in Nijjar's fatal shooting in June. A diplomatic feud with India as a result of the allegations remains ongoing. This could be a case that shifts national discussions about rigged elections toward state harassment and intimidation at the individual level.

Having survived several attempts on his life inside and outside Pakistan, Goraya is adamant that transnational repression can't be addressed by local law enforcement. "Even in Europe, I am not safe, police tell me that," says Goraya.

"The law enforcement tries their best, but the political will is not there—you cannot be provided a safe house for your whole life. At some point, the EU, the European governments, have to talk to Pakistan. And we don't see that happening, and until that happens, it is not sufficient."

JOHAR WAS with Sameer Mehrab and some friends, waiting by the ferry docks on Ward's Island, when the police told them they had found Karima's body. The group had been scouring the island for her. Later, at the funeral home, Johar couldn't stop crying, knowing it would be the last time he saw her. It was the worst day of his life.

Mehrab's family and friends assert that her death was suspicious and also that she was depressed. They maintain the Pakistani state is responsible regardless of the cause of death. Toronto Police declined interview requests, stating that "officers have determined this to be a non-criminal death and no foul play is suspected." Mehrab could not swim, and there are no known witnesses to her death. Traces of sleeping pills were found in her system, and the coroner found no signs of pre-death trauma. On December 23, 2020, two days after her body was located, Toronto Police closed the case. Her death has officially been labelled a suicide.

As is Baloch custom, Mehrab's body was flown back to Pakistan to be buried in her Balochistan hometown of Tump. Crowds had assembled in Karachi to greet her body and escort it on its final journey, and thousands were anticipated for her funeral. But Pakistani security confiscated the body upon its arrival and would not allow the large mourning procession. Tump was placed under paramilitary control, and the army declared a curfew for the region, closing roads and suspending mobile phone services. The day before her funeral, hundreds protested in Karachi. Mehrab was buried in her hometown on January 25, 2021, amidst crowds of local mourners.

For writer Mohammed Hanif, a friend of Sajid Hussain's, these politics of burial are a further final act of repression. State demands for a restricted funeral are painful. Many Pakistanis abroad view burial in their home country as a practice deeply embedded in religion and culture. Hanif feels examples like Mehrab's have been used to instill fear: if exiles do not behave, they will never really be able to return home—even after their death.

That still hasn't deterred Johar. He is planning to start his own foundation in Canada focused on research and education about Balochistan. He envisions a centre that partners with Western universities, offers scholarships, runs human rights campaigns, and serves as a hub for the study of issues concerning Baloch people. Johar is also channelling his advocacy in a new direction, investigating Canadian mining company Barrick Gold Corporation's recent operations in his home province. And while he may have a low profile in Canada, "back home, everyone knows me. And they follow me" on social media, he says. He smiles and then chuckles quietly. "I think I can do good work—if I don't get killed." 💻

MEGHAN DAVIDSON LADLY's work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Globe and Mail*, and *Telegraph*.