Transnational Repression by the GCC: The Misuse of Intergovernmental Organizations

1. Context and Background

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have long been criticized for employing repressive domestic measures that violate international human rights standards. In the years since the 2011 Arab uprisings, these governments have intensified their crackdown on dissent through the enactment of repressive laws on counterterrorism, cybercrimes, and peaceful gatherings. These vaguely worded and broadly interpreted national security measures have been used to convict activists, journalists, academics, and others who criticize the government or its leadership. Human rights violations in the region, however, extend well beyond restrictions on freedom of expression. They include patterns of arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, and disproportionate sentencing, including the death penalty, as well as the use of torture and ill-treatment in detention.[1]

However, the reach of GCC countries' repression does not stop at national borders. These states have increasingly turned to transnational repression: the extraterritorial targeting of dissidents and critics. This includes unlawful removals such as expulsions, extraditions, and deportations, as well as surveillance, and threats directed at individuals living in exile and their families.[2] These efforts often involve grave human rights violations and rarely occur in isolation; rather, they are frequently enabled by international or regional cooperation.[3]

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[1] Amnesty International Aotearoa New Zealand. "GCC Summit: Systematic Clampdown on Freedom of Expression in Gulf." *Amnesty International Aotearoa New Zealand.* https://amnesty.org.nz/gcc-summit-systematic-clampdown-freedom-expression-gulf/

[2] Human Rights Watch,. *"We Will Find You": A Global Look at How Governments Repress Nationals Abroad*. February 22, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/22/we-will-find-you/global-look-how-governments-repress-nationals-abroad.

[3] Lemon, Edward. "International Organizations as Tools of Transnational Repression: Strategies of Institutional Manipulation and Resistance." In *Transnational Repression in the Age of Globalization*, 287-312. 2024. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399506083-015.

In this context, intergovernmental organizations have become critical enablers of transnational repression, as authoritarian states, including GCC countries, have exploited these institutions to legitimize and facilitate their efforts to silence opposition abroad. By embedding autocratic norms—particularly the vague and overly broad security provisions—into the frameworks of such organizations, authoritarian governments gain tools to bypass human rights obligations, accelerate extraditions, and enhance their control over perceived political threats.[4] Two organizations are especially notable in this context: the Arab Interior Ministers' Council (AIMC) and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). Both have been instrumental as primary channels of intergovernmental cooperation exploited by GCC states to facilitate transnational repression.[5]

2. The Arab Interior Ministers' Council

2.1. Legal Frameworks

Established in 1982 as a specialized body of the League of Arab States, the AIMC brings together the interior ministries of its member states to strengthen regional cooperation in security and crime prevention. Acting as a central hub for judicial coordination, the AIMC facilitates the circulation of arrest warrants, manages extradition requests, and oversees a regional database of individuals wanted for criminal offences, particularly those related to terrorism. When a wanted person is located outside their country of origin, a member state can submit a request to the AIMC, which then disseminates the arrest warrant to all Arab League states via its internal communication divisions, thereby enhancing the likelihood of apprehension. Moreover, since the AIMC is composed of Interior Ministries that function as extensions of their respective governments, it can

[4] Lemon, "International Organizations as Tools."
[5] Red Notice Monitor. "Double Indemnity: Interpol and the Arab Interior Ministers' Council." *Red Notice Monitor*, June 27, 2023. https://rednoticemonitor.com/double-indemnity-interpol-and-the-arab-interior-ministers-council/

actively locate individuals within a member state's territory without having to rely on the individuals appearing at checkpoints such as airports or border crossings.[6]

To facilitate the tracking and apprehension of wanted individuals, the General Secretariat, through its Department of Criminal Prosecution and Data, maintains a centralized database containing information on individuals sought by its Member States and coordinates the circulation of search warrants. To improve efficiency, the AIMC introduced an electronic application in 2017, which rapidly streamlines the generation and dissemination of search warrants, further reinforcing the organization's role as a key conduit for regional law enforcement cooperation.[7]

Adopted in 1983 by the Council of Arab Ministers of Justice, the Riyadh Convention serves as a foundational legal instrument for inter-state judicial collaboration among Arab League members by foreseeing the recognition and enforcement of foreign judgments.[8] The agreement provides the legal basis for extradition between member states, obliging parties under Article 38 to surrender individuals accused or convicted of crimes, even when those convictions were rendered in absentia, to the requesting state. Article 40 further expands this obligation by allowing extradition for acts that may not be criminalized, or are punished less severely, in the requested state, and when no legal equivalence exists.[9] Although Article 41 appears to prohibit extradition for crimes of a "political nature," this safeguard is weakened by the agreement's explicit exclusion of certain offenses, such as assaults on state leadership, from being classified as political. The agreement notably provides no definition of what constitutes an "assault," effectively leaving its interpretation to the discretion of individual member states. In practice, this ambiguity allows states to exploit the provision by labeling acts of political dissent,

[6] MENA Rights Group. "Understanding the Arab Interior Ministers' Council and its Role in Transnational Repression." *Mena Rights Group,* August 17, 2023. https://menarights.org/en/articles/aimc.
[7] MENA Rights Group. "Transnational repression in the MENA: the Role of Regional Organisations Engaged in Counter-Terrorism." *Mena Rights Group,* July 4, 2024. https://www.menarights.org/en/articles/transnational-repression-mena-role-regional-organisations-engaged-counter-terrorism
[8] Ibid.
[9] Council of Arab Ministers of Justice. *Riyadh Arab Agreement for Judicial Cooperation*. League of Arab States, April 6, 1983. https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/las/1983/en/39231

journalism, or human rights advocacy as criminal offenses. As a result, individuals can be extradited for engaging in activities that are protected under international law, including the rights to political participation and to freedom of opinion and expression. Fundamental human rights are, thus, violated under the guise of regional judicial cooperation.[10]

The Arab CT Convention, adopted in 1998 by the AIMC and the Council of Arab Ministers of Justice as part of AIMC's counterterrorism strategy, suffers from many of the same shortcomings as the Riyadh Convention. While the convention affirms its commitment to the United Nations (UN) Charter and states an intention to promote peace and protect human rights, its definition of terrorism is extremely vague. It encompasses "any act or threat of violence, whatever its motives or purposes, that occurs in the advancement of an individual or collective criminal agenda," including acts that cause panic among people, damage the environment, or threaten national resources. Moreover, with regard to extradition, the convention prohibits extraditing individuals for offenses considered political under the laws of the requested state. However, much like the Riyadh Convention, the determination of what qualifies as a political offense is left to the discretion of individual member states. As many of these member states adopt similarly vague and overreaching definitions of terrorism, this regional framework enables the criminalization of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and political participation, effectively legitimizing the extradition and arrest of peaceful dissidents under the pretext of counterterrorism and security.[11]

In all, The AIMC's Basic Laws make no reference to human rights, and the broader legal frameworks underpinning the organization, the Riyadh Convention and the Arab CT

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[10] United Nations Human Rights Council. *Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression and the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues: Communication to the Arab Interior Ministers' Council*. Reference: OL OTH 71/2023. June 23, 2023. https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28070

[11] Amnesty International. *The Arab Convention for Suppression of Terrorism: A Serious Threat to Human RIghts.* IOR 51/001/2002. January 9, 2002. https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ior510012002en.pdf

Convention, entirely omit the international legal obligation of non-refoulement enshrined in article 3 UN Convention on Torture (UNCAT) and article 5 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), which guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture**.** This occurs despite the fact that all member states of the Arab League are parties to the UNCAT. By failing to incorporate these essential provisions, the AIMC enables its member states to circumvent their international commitments, undermining the protection of fundamental rights.[12]

2.2. Lack of Transparency and Independent Oversight in AIMC Mechanisms

The AIMC operates with significant ambiguity and obscurity, both in its legal frameworks and institutional procedures, undermining accountability and oversight**.** The AIMC's Basic Laws remain vague, offering little clarity on procedural standards for issuing arrest warrants or integrating human rights safeguards. Notably, these laws do not grant individuals targeted by such warrants the right to access information about their case or to request the removal of warrants issued against them.[13]

Although a Legal Committee reportedly exists within the AIMC to review member state requests and consider objections from individuals or their legal representatives, in practice, the actual process of challenging warrants remains unclear and inaccessible. Additionally, the composition of the Legal Committee in itself is concerning, as it consists of representatives from member states, raising doubts about the impartiality and independence of its functioning.[14]

Further exacerbating this lack of accountability is the AIMC's restrictive approach to independent oversight. Civil society organizations are systematically excluded from their working bodies and council meetings, which take place behind closed doors without public access to agendas, documents, or even the Arab Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The AIMC has remained unresponsive to repeated requests from non-governmental

[12] MENA Rights Group, "Understanding the Arab Interior Ministers' Council."
[13] MENA Rights Group, "Transnational Repression in the MENA."
[14] Ibid.

organizations and UN bodies for transparency about its mechanisms, particularly regarding the issuance and review of arrest warrants.[15] While the Council occasionally invites National Human Rights Institutions to its activities, many of these institutions, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, lack independence and fail to meet the Paris Principles.[16]

2.3. Individual Cases of AIMC

Several recent cases illustrate how the AIMC's extradition mechanisms have been exploited for politically motivated prosecutions by GCC states, often in violation of the non-refoulement principle.

Hassan al-Rabea is a member of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority whose relatives have faced execution or death sentences, triggering his departure to Morocco in June 2022. In October 2022, Saudi authorities issued a terrorism-related arrest warrant under domestic counterterrorism laws, and in November, the AIMC circulated a request for his provisional arrest. After five months in Morocco, al-Rabea was detained at Marrakech airport in January 2023.[17] On 6 February, al-Rabea was extradited, despite credible risks of torture and persecution on account of his faith and family history of dissent.[18]

Khalaf al-Romaithi is one of the "UAE 94," unfairly tried in 2013 for petitioning for democratic reforms, which resulted in his conviction *in absentia* and sentencing to 15 years imprisonment. In May 2023, a UAE-initiated AIMC request led to his arrest during a short visit to Jordan. He was reportedly extradited to the UAE on 12 May and has since

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[15] United Nations Human Rights Council. *Protection of Human Rights in Regional Organizations While Countering Terrorism*. A/HRC/58/47. March 11, 2025. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5847-protection-human-rights-regional-organizations-while-countering

[16] MENA Rights Group, "Transnational Repression in the MENA."

[17] MENA Rights Group, "Understanding the Arab Interior Ministers' Council."

[18] Human Rights Watch. "Joint Statement: Hassan al-Rabea's Extradition Constitutes a Grave Violation of Morocco's International Obligations." *Human Rights Watch*, February 13, 2023. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/13/joint-statement-hassan-al-rabeas-extradition-constitutes-grave-violation-moroccos

been forcibly disappeared, heightening fears of torture or an unfair retrial for his peaceful activism.[19]

Abdulrahman al-Qaradawi is a Turkish-Egyptian poet who was detained at the Lebanon border in January 2025 after posting an online critique of the UAE government. Acting on an AIMC provisional arrest warrant, Lebanese authorities extradited him despite UN warnings. He has been forcibly disappeared ever since his arrival in the UAE, where he faces a serious risk of human rights abuses.[20]

3. International Criminal Police Organization

3.1. Legal Frameworks and Mechanisms

INTERPOL, as the world's largest international policing body, facilitates cross-border law enforcement cooperation among its 196 member states, particularly through the exchange of crime-related data.[21] The organization is governed by a General Assembly and Executive Committee and is managed by a General Secretariat based in Lyon, France. Each member country maintains a National Central Bureau (NCB), which serves as the national point of contact with INTERPOL and remains embedded within the country's domestic law enforcement structure.[22]

INTERPOL's primary operational tool is its Notice System, which enables the circulation of alerts about wanted individuals. These alerts come primarily in two forms: Red Notices and diffusions. Red Notices are formal requests issued by NCBs and distributed to all member states upon the General Secretariat's approval in order to locate and

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[19] Human Rights Watch. "Jordan: Emirati/Turkish Man Facing Forced Return." *Human Rights Watch*, May 12, 2023. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/12/jordan-emirati/turkish-man-facing-forced-return

[20] MENA Rights Group. "Egyptian poet arrested by Lebanese authorities and extradited to the UAE after criticising Gulf countries online." *MENA Rights Group*, January 21, 2025. https://menarights.org/en/case/abdelrahman-youssef-al-qaradawi

[21] INTERPOL. "Member Countries." *INTERPOL*. Accessed May 19, 2025. https://www.interpol.int/en/Who-we-are/Member-countries#:~:text=INTERPOL%20has%20196%20member%20countries.police%20with%20our%20global%20network.

[22] Andall, Richard, Daniela Suter, and Gabriela Ivan-Cucu. *Misuse of Interpol's Red Notices and Impact on Human Rights – Recent Developments.* European Parliament, January 17, 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2019)603472

provisionally arrest individuals for extradition. Diffusions are less formal alerts circulated directly among NCBs without oversight by INTERPOL's General Secretariat, allowing more discretion in their use.[23]

INTERPOL's constitution outlines safeguards meant to ensure the neutrality of its systems. Article 2 mandates cooperation between law enforcement agencies "in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," while Article 3 strictly prohibits the organization from interfering in activities of political, military, religious, or racial character.[24] Accordingly, INTERPOL applies the predominance test to assess whether a request is politically motivated on a case-by-case basis. Since 2015, the organization has adopted several reforms to strengthen its legal safeguards, including a refined vetting process for Red Notices and diffusions, and enhancements to the mandate of the Commission for the Control of INTERPOL's Files (CCF), the body responsible for data protection and redress.[25]

3.2. Misuse and Violations

Despite these constitutional provisions and reforms, INTERPOL's systems remain susceptible to misuse, especially by states with repressive legal frameworks, such as the GCC countries. These vulnerabilities have become more pronounced following the election of Emirati general Ahmed Naser Al Raisi as INTERPOL's president, despite allegations of his involvement in torture and political repression in the UAE.[26] His election, alongside increased financial contributions from Gulf states, has intensified concerns about the organization's susceptibility to political influence.[27]

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[23] Ibid.
[24] INTERPOL. "Legal Documents." *INTERPOL*. Accessed on May 19, 2025. https://www.interpol.int/en/Who-we-are/Legal-framework/Legal-documents
[25] Andall, Suter, and Ivan-Cucu, *Misuse of Interpol's Red Notices.*
[26] Human Rights Watch. "Interpol: UAE Official's Candidacy Raises Human Rights Alarms." *Human Rights Watch,* May 5, 2021. https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/05/interpol-uae-officials-candidacy-raises-human-rights-alarms
[27] The New Arab Staff. "Interpol to set up regional office in Saudi Arabia amid rights concerns." *The New Arab,* January 30, 2025. https://www.newarab.com/news/interpol-set-new-regional-office-saudi-arabia

GCC states have exploited INTERPOL's Notice System to target exiled dissidents, political opponents, and human rights defenders. This abuse stems from INTERPOL's reliance on individual member states to self-certify the legality and legitimacy of their requests, and whether they align with the organization's constitution and their domestic jurisdiction.[28] Diffusions are especially susceptible to abuse, as they bypass the General Secretariat's oversight and can be shared bilaterally between NCBs. Even when INTERPOL rejects a diffusion or Red Notice request, there is limited enforcement to ensure NCBs comply, as rejected notices may continue to circulate in national databases.[29]

Another concern is a lack of transparency and due process. Red Notice requests from GCC countries are often not publicly disclosed, leaving targeted individuals unaware until they are detained abroad.[30] While INTERPOL offers mechanisms for individuals to request information or challenge the notices against them, this process is frequently slow and cumbersome. Many individuals endure prolonged periods of legal uncertainty and the looming risk of arrest.[31] Investigations by Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) have uncovered numerous secret case files, which, after long and burdensome appeals, were immediately deleted, indicating that notices were issued without a solid legal basis.[32] Therefore, even amid INTERPOL's reforms, there is limited access to the rules and procedures the General Secretariat and the CCF apply in the process of evaluating cases.[33]

3.3. Individual Cases

[28] Andall, Suter, and Ivan-Cucu, *Misuse of Interpol's Red Notices.*
[29] Ibid.
[30] Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB). "INTERPOL Deletion Request Program." *ADHRB*, April 17, 2019. https://www.adhrb.org/2019/04/interpol-deletion-request-program/
[31] Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB). "Event Summary: ADHRB Hosts Panel on INTERPOL Misuse and Human Rights." *ADHRB*, October 17, 2024. https://www.adhrb.org/2024/10/event-summary-adhrb-hosts-panel-on-interpol-misuse-and-human-rights/
[32] ADHRB, "INTERPOL Deletion Request Program."
[33] Andall, Suter, and Ivan-Cucu, *Misuse of Interpol's Red Notices.*

The misuse of INTERPOL's mechanisms by GCC states has resulted in serious human rights violations, particularly breaches of the principle of non-refoulement. Politically motivated notices continue to lead to extraditions that place individuals at grave risk; not only restricting their freedom of movement and damaging their reputations, but also exposing them to arbitrary detention, torture, or enforced disappearance.

In 2021, Saudi-Australian academic **Osama al-Hasani** was detained in Morocco while visiting his wife and newborn child. Acting on a Saudi-issued Red Notice, Moroccan authorities extradited al-Hasani despite the fact that the charges against him—relating to an alleged car theft—had previously been dropped.[34] He is now serving a four-year prison sentence in Saudi Arabia without a fair trial or clear legal justification, in a country with a well-documented record of torturing detainees and silencing dissent.[35]

Bahraini political dissident, **Ahmed Jaffer Muhammad,** was extradited from Serbia to Bahrain in 2022, despite previously being tortured in custody and sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment. His extradition ignored an interim measure from the European Court of Human Rights and violated Serbia's obligations under international human rights treaties, including UNCAT. [36]

4. INTERPOL-AIMC Cooperation

INTERPOL's expanding presence in the Middle East is reflected in its cooperation with the AIMC. The partnership was formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in 1999, which established a framework for mutual consultation, information exchange, access to databases, and technical cooperation in criminal and other relevant matters. The MoU commits both organizations to enhancing their

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[34] Human Rights Watch. "Saudi Arabia: Reveal Status of Saudi-Australian." *Human Rights Watch*, May 4, 2021. https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/04/saudi-arabia-reveal-status-saudi-australian

[35] SANAD. "SANAD Calls for the Release of Dr. Osama Al-Hasani and Compensation for the Violations He Endured." *SANAD*, January 16, 2025. https://sanad.uk/2025/01/16/sanad-calls-for-the-release-of-dr-osama-al-hasani-and-compensation-for-the-violations-he-endured/

[36] Human Rights Watch. "Serbia: Bahraini Dissident Unlawfully Extradited." *Human Rights Watch,* January 27, 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/27/serbia-bahraini-dissident-unlawfully-extradited

competence in executing their respective mandates, while the preamble and operational clauses explicitly reference maintaining law and order "with due respect for human rights."[37]

Although the MoU outlines areas of collaboration, INTERPOL stresses that it and the AIMC maintain separate databases and legal frameworks. There is no direct coordination between the two regarding notices or diffusions, and neither organization holds the authority to compel the other to act on a request concerning a wanted individual. The reference to "technical cooperation" is described as standard terminology for such agreements, and AIMC-related communications do not involve INTERPOL unless routed through its official channels.[38]

Despite these formal distinctions, the relationship between INTERPOL and AIMC has deepened over time. In 2011, INTERPOL signed a cooperation agreement with the Naif Arab University for Security Sciences (NAUSS), AIMC's academic branch, to enhance police training. In 2022, a renewed cooperation agreement aimed at broadening the scope of collaboration between the two organizations, avoiding duplication efforts, and establishing clearer frameworks for data sharing in order to facilitate the prevention and suppression of ordinary law crimes in the Arab region and globally.[39]

Most recently, in January 2025, INTERPOL announced an agreement to open a regional office in Saudi Arabia. This office is expected to work closely with AIMC and NAUSS to strengthen cooperation and information sharing across the Middle East and North Africa.[40] While INTERPOL affirms its adherence to the principles of the UDHR, as enshrined in its Constitution, concerns remain about the consistency of that commitment in practice.[41] The AIMC makes no explicit commitment to international human rights

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[37] MENA Rights Group, "Transnational Repression in the MENA."
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB). "Saudi Arabia's New INTERPOL Office: A Dangerous Expansion of Transnational Repression." *ADHRB*, May 2, 2025. https://www.adhrb.org/2025/05/saudi-arabias-new-interpol-office-a-dangerous-expansion-of-transnational-repression/
[41] Andall, Suter, and Ivan-Cucu, *Misuse of Interpol's Red Notices.*

standards.[42] Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has a well-documented record of human rights abuses, often justified under the guise of national security.[43] INTERPOL's decision to deepen cooperation with these entities, thus, raises serious questions about the integrity of its human rights commitments.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The exploitation of intergovernmental organizations like the AIMC and INTERPOL by GCC states has enabled a growing pattern of transnational repression, marked by politically motivated arrests, extraditions, and grave human rights violations. These mechanisms, often operating with limited transparency, inadequate oversight, and vague legal frameworks, have facilitated the targeting of dissidents beyond national borders, often violating the principle of non-refoulement and other international human rights obligations.

To address these abuses, a coordinated and rights-based response is urgently needed:

1. **Legal Reform and Alignment with Human Rights Standards**
    a. Regional bodies like the AIMC must revise their counter-terrorism conventions to align with international human rights standards, narrowing overly broad definitions of terrorism and ensuring robust protections against politically motivated prosecutions and extraditions.
    b. The AIMC should disclose the full text of its Counter-Terrorism Strategy and all procedural rules governing the circulation of arrest warrants.
    c. Both the AIMC and INTERPOL must explicitly integrate non-refoulement safeguards into their operational mandates, ensuring that extradition requests involving risks of torture, unfair trial, or enforced disappearance are systematically rejected.
2. **Institutional Cooperation and Conditionality**

[42] MENA Rights Group, "Understanding the Arab Interior Ministers' Council."
[43] Human Rights Warch. "World Report 2025: Saudi Arabia."
https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/saudi-arabia

a. INTERPOL should suspend efforts to deepen cooperation with the AIMC until the AIMC incorporates explicit references to international human rights standards into its legal frameworks and demonstrates adequate procedural safeguards against abuse.
b. Similarly, INTERPOL must refrain from privileging engagement with GCC states until these governments demonstrate genuine implementation of human rights standards and are held accountable for their ongoing abuses.

3. **Transparency and Procedural Improvements**
    a. The AIMC must grant individuals the right to file access requests and to demand the removal of arrest warrants or diffusions issued against them. It should also establish an independent oversight mechanism to filter out abuses of its systems.
    b. INTERPOL must continue reforms to clarify and enhance the transparency of its review procedures for Red Notices and diffusions. It should also improve the responsiveness and efficiency of its GS in processing and updating individuals on their notice status.
4. **Civil Society Oversight and Inclusion**
    a. These policing bodies must facilitate meaningful engagement with independent civil society and human rights organizations. This includes granting them access to meetings, strategic documents, and procedural frameworks, enabling them to serve as mechanisms for oversight, evaluation, and accountability of institutional practices.

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