

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Covert Collaboration

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Credit: Llewellyn/Alamy Stock Photo

From 2001 to 2009, the United States Central Intelligence Agency operated a policy of covert capture and interrogation of suspected terrorists known as Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation (RDI). Over the past decade, scholars, policy-makers, and human rights advocates have debated both the morality and effectiveness of the program, but there has been little discussion of its wider consequences.

A new study by Averell Schmidt and Kathryn Sikkink of Harvard University examines the effects of the program on the practices of countries that participated in, but did not create, the program. Using cross-national data on human rights practices over time, they show that authoritarian states that actively participated in the RDI program developed significantly worse human rights records after their collaboration began. Even after the program ended in 2009, authoritarian countries that participated continued to engage in more abusive practices compared to their prior policies and compared to the practices of similar nondemocratic states that did not collaborate. The practices of democratic countries that participated in the RDI program did not significantly change, suggesting that democratic institutions could play a role in preventing the spread of adverse policies.

The study highlights the potential for policy choices made by one country to influence the actions of other countries through covert cooperation mechanisms.

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