



Justice4Yemen Pact
ميثاق العدالة لليمن

INFORMATIONAL BRIEF

Detention of Aid Workers and Alleged “Spy Network” Bust Indicate Houthis’ Crackdown on Civil Society

JULY 2024



Executive Summary

Since May 31, 2024, Ansar Allah - Houthi de facto authorities have arbitrarily detained dozens of Yemeni employees of UN agencies, and international and Yemeni non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The affected UN agencies and international NGOs have described these detentions as unprecedented “not only in Yemen but globally.” Houthi authorities have not publicly released information about the recent arrests.

However, on June 10th authorities announced that they had busted an “American-Israeli spy network” that had allegedly been working in Yemen for decades. The men alleged to be part of this “spy network” are not the same as the recent detainees—instead, they are mostly former employees of the US embassy in Yemen, as well as international NGOs and UN agencies, who had been detained between 2021 and 2023. Houthi-affiliated media have released “confession” videos of these detainees, which appear to be staged, were likely coerced, and some of which contain outlandish claims. These confession videos fit a pattern of

About the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+)

The goal of the Yemen Human Rights Forensics Lab Plus (YHRFL+) program is to increase recognition and protection of human rights in Yemen by empowering Yemeni civil society to champion justice and accountability through human rights documentation, reporting, and advocacy efforts. The YHRFL+ program is working to systematically document, preserve, corroborate, analyze, and report on evidence, obtained from a variety of sources, of human rights violations committed by all parties involved in the Yemeni conflict. Results of this analysis are summarized and presented in a series of investigative reports focusing on specific identified incidents of human rights violations. YHRFL+ also support efforts by Yemeni CSO partners to carry out strategic advocacy, community outreach, and victim and survivor engagement interventions locally and internationally.

About Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition

The Justice4Yemen Pact is a coalition of human rights organizations and civil society actors that are united for the promotion and protection of human rights in Yemen. The coalition’s mission is to advocate for the rights of all Yemeni people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. The coalition is committed to addressing the systemic human rights violations that have been plaguing Yemen through years of conflict and violence. The Justice4Yemen Pact works to empower Yemeni people to claim their rights, raise awareness of violations, and advocate for justice and accountability at local, national, and international levels. The Justice4Yemen Pact is guided by the principles of respect for human dignity, equality, justice, and non-discrimination. The coalition believes that by working together, its members can end impunity, provide meaningful support, and redress for victims, and contribute to a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future for Yemen.

Acknowledgement

The Justice4Yemen Pact coalition thanks member organizations SAM for Rights and Liberties (SAM), and the Abductees Mothers Association (AMA), for their work documenting the violations profiled in this report.

Houthi authorities using trumped-up charges of spying to punish perceived opponents including journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society workers. Under Yemeni law, espionage is punishable by execution.

These two events—the recent detention of the UN and NGO employees, and the news of the alleged “spy network” bust—indicate an ongoing crackdown on humanitarian and civil society work in Houthi territories. Houthi media and officials have repeatedly claimed, when talking about the “spy network” bust, that humanitarian and civil society work are a cover for espionage. This campaign of public incitement has reportedly been paired with similar incitement against humanitarian and civil society workers in mosques and mass gatherings. Furthermore, authorities have publicized hotlines for residents to report “suspicious movements” to the intelligence services. On July 1, 2024, the Chairperson of the Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat announced a 30-day amnesty period for those linked to the alleged “spy network” to come forward, following which they would bear the “harshest punishments” for “treason.” This indicates that the Houthi authorities might conduct additional detentions targeting aid and civil society workers, employees of foreign embassies, or other perceived opponents.

The UN agencies and international NGOs whose Yemeni staff have been recently detained, as well as those detained previously, should take all available measures to ensure their release, including robust advocacy campaigns, and legal support to detainees and their families, security conditions permitting. They should communicate clearly and regularly with detainees’ families. Yemeni human rights organizations and activists have condemned what they see as a tepid response from UN agencies and the international community towards the detained Yemeni employees. Detainees’ families have reported a lack of help and communication from UN agencies.

This report is based on open-source research, as well as interviews conducted by two organizations in the Justice4Yemen pact coalition, SAM for Rights and Liberties, and the Abductees’ Mothers Association (AMA), with family members of two of the detainees whom Houthi authorities allege are part of the “spy network.”

Background to the UN and NGO employee arrests

The recent wave of arrests began on May 31, 2024 and reportedly resulted in the detention of approximately 50 people by June 7, 2024, and more than 70 people by June 25.ⁱ The UN reported that 13 of the detainees are personnel with UN entities: six from OHCHR, two from UNESCO, and one each from the Office of the Special Envoy to Yemen, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO.ⁱⁱ The UN Special Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg told the Security Council on June 13 that 5 other recent detainees were employees of international NGOs.ⁱⁱⁱ The remaining detainees work for Yemeni humanitarian and civil society organizations—including the Civil Alliance for Peace, the Institute for Transparency and Combating Corruption, Percent, and Partners Yemen—as well as foreign embassies.^{iv} Some of the detained employees of Yemeni organizations have managerial positions: executive director, deputy director, president, department head, program director, etc.^v

In previous years, the Houthis arrested a number of UN employees, including four from OHCHR and UNESCO who remain in incommunicado detention today.^{vi} Nevertheless, the principals of the UN agencies and international NGOs impacted by the recent arrests described them as unprecedented “not only in Yemen but globally.”^{vii}

ⁱ These impacted INGOs, according to a statement from the organizations’ principals, are Oxfam International, Save the Children, and CARE International. In addition, the National Democratic Institute has acknowledged the detention of three staff members.

Alleged “American-Israeli spy network”

These recent arrests coincide with the Houthi authorities’ announcement on June 10 that they had broken up an alleged “American-Israeli spy network” operating in Yemen.^{viii} The men alleged to be part of this “network” are not the same individuals arrested during the recent wave of detentions—rather, they are mostly former employees of the US embassy in Yemen, as well as UN agencies and international NGOs, who were detained between 2021 and 2023.^{ix} Many have been held incommunicado since that time.^x

Houthi media and officials allege that the “spy network” conducted wide ranging intelligence gathering and sabotage activities on behalf of the United States and Israel for decades.^{xi} They allege that this network targeted critical sectors including agriculture, health, education, and banking. Houthi leaders have blamed the network for widespread governmental failures that threaten to erode their public support.^{2 xii}

In addition, Houthi media and officials allege that the spy network targeted Yemeni culture by promoting gender mixing, gay rights, women’s empowerment, and other aims said to be at odds with Yemeni culture.^{xiii} These charges fit within the wider Houthi narrative of a western-led “Soft War” that seeks to undermine Yemen’s authentic Islamic identity and make Yemenis subservient.

Houthi media have released a series of “confession videos” from the detainees which appear to be staged and were likely coerced. Human Rights Watch wrote on June 26 that “there is a high risk that these confessions were coerced. Human Rights Watch has previously documented the Houthis’ use of torture to obtain confessions. Publishing videos of confessions undermines the right to fair trial and lacks credibility.”^{xiv}

These “confession videos” display letters of recommendation, performance evaluations, and other documents (such as letters in support of visa applications) written by US embassy staff and other US government personnel. None of these documents appear to contain evidence of espionage activity.



Front page of newspaper al-Masirah on June 30, 2024, depicting members of the alleged “spy network.”

The text reads: “Encouraging vice and [sexual] abnormality among young men and encouraging young women to remove the hijab and abandon Yemeni culture and traditions. Infiltrating society to control the elite and Americanize them, and dazzling [them] with western culture...systematic American destruction of the culture.”

² For example, Houthi leader Abdul Malek al-Houthi said in a June 13 speech remarking on the alleged “spy network” bust: “[The spy network] achieved very dangerous successes, and greatly damaged our dear people. In the realm of education, our people see the education sector collapse, heading towards decline and retreat—everything in the country, for many years, is heading towards collapse. The economy, education, the health sector...and our people feel it, they feel the great failure in governmental and official institutions’ performance, truly incredible failure—strategies, decisions, policies, all of them failed. Failed official performance. And a big part of the reasons of this failure are due to that [spy network] infiltration.”

Some of the videotaped “confessions” have prompted skepticism and disbelief from Yemeni commentators online due to their outlandish content, particularly the alleged “confession” of Amer al-Aghbari. Al-Aghbari, who worked with several UN agencies during his career, in addition to the US embassy, claimed he imported pestilences, poisonous pesticides, trees that destroy the soil, and animal diseases into Yemen on behalf of American intelligence services.

Houthi authorities have repeatedly sentenced human rights defenders, journalists, politicians, and other perceived opponents to death on spurious or trumped-up charges of espionage following unfair trials.^{xv} Espionage is punishable by execution in Yemen. Most recently the Specialized Criminal Court in Sana’a sentenced 44 people to death in early June for espionage, following an unfair mass trial, most of whom were politicians from the Islah party.^{xvi}

Families speak up in defense of two detainees

After the release of the “confession” videos, SAM for Rights and Liberties, and AMA spoke to the families of two of the detainees whom Houthi authorities allege are members of the “spy network”—Amer al-Aghbari, and Abdul Qader al-Saqqaf. Following are summaries of the information provided by the detainees’ families:

Amer Al-Aghbari

At the time of his arrest on October 29, 2021, al-Aghbari was working for UNICEF on education programming. He also worked with the Global Partnership for Education and had previously been an employee with the US embassy in Yemen.

Al-Aghbari’s family believes that the main reason for his arrest was the fact that he had in his possession a check worth approximately \$1,080,000 from UNICEF. The check was intended to be used for a UNICEF program to import science laboratories and distribute them to over 150 schools across the country. During al-Aghbari’s arrest this check was confiscated by Houthi security services, as were three cars belonging to the family.

Al-Aghbari’s family emphasized that since his arrest, they have received no information from UNICEF regarding his status or help to secure his release. Instead, each time they have communicated with UNICEF inquiring about al-Aghbari they have received the same response containing general language: “We would like to reassure you that UNICEF has been following up on the issue with authorities from the start. So far UNICEF has not received any additional information, however, please be assured that our Senior Management will continue to follow up with relevant authorities.” An immediate family member traveled to New York and visited UNICEF at the beginning of 2024, but said they were expelled from the building and threatened with police.

Abdul Qader al-Saqqaf

Al-Saqqaf was a political affairs specialist at the US embassy from 1998 until 2014, when he retired. His family told SAM that during his retirement he had distanced himself from politics and spent his time helping to raise his grandchildren.

Al-Saqqaf was arrested on November 21, 2021, following which his family visited various governmental agencies to learn his whereabouts—authorities told them they did not know what agency had arrested al-Saqqaf, or where



Al-Aghbari stands accused of “influencing the bees,” prompting sarcastic and incredulous responses on social media, as above.

Source: Facebook

he was being held. The family added that until al-Saqqaf's appearance in the "confession" video in June 2024, they did not know what he was being charged with.

"He is a successful, educated man, and well-known in his community. He worked for years supporting the poor and teaching youth. Ask about him anywhere he worked, you will find people remember him fondly, as a good man. And suddenly, with no warning, he found himself in a dark prison on charges he did not commit," al-Saqqaf's family commented for this report.

"The evidence displayed against him is weak and unconvincing. There are no documents proving he was involved in anything illegal, only false accusations. And since his arrest we as a family are suffering—we lost our emotional support. He has been exposed in prison to physical and psychological violations, solitary confinement...his face has aged 20 years over the past 3 years," continued the family.

In addition, a family member told Yemeni journalist Fares al-Hemyari that al-Saqqaf had worked for the US embassy in an official capacity and on public, official work tasks.^{xvii} The family member emphasized that al-Saqqaf "was not involved in any illegal activity, the claims that have been broadcast are misleading and false. Under this logic, any employee of any embassy is considered a spy, and any letters of recommendation or certificates of good performance constitute an accusation."^{xviii}

Authorities inaugurate incitement campaign against aid and civil society work, indicating crackdown

The recent arrest campaign targeting UN and NGO workers has been described as an unprecedented assault on Yemeni civil society.^{xix} The alleged "American-Israeli spy network" bust also fits within this context, as authorities have used the news of the alleged "spy network" to emphasize the link between humanitarian and civil society work on one hand, and espionage on the other (see below for examples). This indicates that authorities are attempting to influence public opinion against the recently detained UN and NGO employees and justify their arrests by associating them with espionage.

"The Houthi group has publicized these false and incredible reports to justify its detention of [UN and NGO] employees, in an attempt to mislead the international community and damage the reputation of humanitarian organizations," Tawfiq al-Hamidi, the president of SAM for Rights and Liberties, commented for this report.

More broadly, by playing up the link between humanitarian/civil society work and espionage, authorities are raising the specter of a further crackdown on the aid and civil society sectors. Additional evidence that de facto authorities are tightening their grip over these sectors is the sentencing to death on June 1, 2024, of Adnan Harazi, the founder and director of Prodigy Systems, a company that provided monitoring and evaluation services to UN agencies and international NGOs. Harazi was charged with working with the "Saudi-Emirati aggression" and espionage.^{xx} Yemeni human rights organizations have condemned Harazi's detention as arbitrary and his trial as lacking basic fair trial guarantees.^{xxi}

In addition, following the recent wave of detentions, aid workers in Sana'a have described a wider incitement campaign directed against them. "The situation is unbearable. The incitement campaigns in the mosques, the media and in popular events that followed the arrests targeting our colleagues, have turned our lives into hell, every one of us and his family is suspicious until proven otherwise," an aid worker in Sana'a told Saudi newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat.^{xxii} Authorities have publicized a hotline for citizens to report any "suspicious activity."^{xxiii}

On July 1, 2024, the Chairman of the Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat, directed security and intelligence agencies to grant amnesty to those who "were connected, or cooperated with the American-Israeli network" and to turn themselves in within 30 days.^{xxiv} Following this 30-day period, "everyone who was involved in treason will bear the full consequences and the harshest punishments will be taken against them."^{xxv} This indicates that the Houthi authorities might carry out additional detentions targeting aid and civil society workers,

employees of foreign embassies, or other perceived opponents. “There are more [espionage] cells, some of them will be unveiled soon, God willing,” Houthi leader Abdul Malek al-Houthi said on July 7.^{xxvi}

Examples of Houthi media and officials using the alleged “spy network” bust to incite the public against humanitarian and civil society work

June 10: In an article describing the alleged spy network bust, Saba.ye wrote that “since the American embassy left Sana’a in early 2015, the spy network continued to implement its sabotage agenda under the cover of international and UN organizations, raising the slogans of humanitarian work to cover up the truth of their spying and sabotage activities.”^{xxvii}

June 11: Lt. General Jalal al-Ruweishan, the Prime Minister’s Deputy for Security and Defense Affairs, told al-Masirah: “global humanitarian work is controlled by the United States of America and its intelligence services to pass American plans and goals. Consequently, humanitarian aid, rights, and liberties—it is merely a cover for hostile intelligence operations that achieve Washington’s interests.”^{xxviii}

June 11: In some of the alleged “confession” videos aired by Saba.ye, detainees admit to having conducted intelligence operations on behalf of humanitarian agencies. For example, Abdul Mu’in Azzan says that he worked with the UN’s office of the high commissioner of human rights “in its wide-ranging intelligence activity for the benefit of the American CIA.” He says the UN’s OHCHR gathers information on Houthi missile and drone capabilities, launching sites, and troop locations on the front lines. He added that OHCHR field monitors collect intelligence under the pretext of monitoring human rights violations and protecting civilians. Finally, Azzan said that he supplied the Israeli Mossad with information gathered from OHCHR’s database, including the locations and coordinates of government and Ansar Allah headquarters, as well as officials’ houses.^{xxix}

June 13: In a speech talking about the war in Gaza and the alleged “spy network” bust, Houthi leader Abdul Malek al-Houthi says (emphasis added): “[The Americans] want everything evil and bad to happen to people, they work for that purpose. What do the Americans want? What do they strive for? What do they plan? What are the means and methods they use? **How did they infiltrate the NGOs and work through them? How did they infiltrate the UN and work through it?** How did they infiltrate the official institutions...”^{xxx}

June 17: Mohammad Ali al-Houthi, a high-ranking official and member of the Supreme Political Council, tells Saba.ye that American statements regarding the alleged spy network bust “confirm what the security services have revealed—using humanitarian and aid work as a cover for espionage.”^{xxxi}

July 4: The Minister of Human Rights in the Houthi de facto government says, at a press conference, that “the [UN] security council, and the agencies and international organizations belonging to the UN, have been infiltrated without taking any measures against that, especially by employees of the American embassy, who move easily



An image posted by the Houthi War Media channel in its writeup of the “spy network” bust on June 10. The graphic lists 14 UN and foreign government agencies, and NGOs, working in the humanitarian, development, and civil society sectors.

The caption above these organizations reads: **After the American embassy left Sana’a in 2015, the [spy] network’s elements continued their spying and sabotage work in several realms, under the cover of various titles.**

between the UN organizations...we need to be wary of infiltration, as the UN has contributed to distorting [the image] of human rights organizations, and allowing America to control and direct it."^{xxxii}

Legal Analysis

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported, concerning the recent arrests of UN and NGO employees, that "Houthi forces did not present search or arrest warrants at the time of arrests, and the authorities have refused to tell families where those arrested are being held, meaning that these acts amount to enforced disappearances...[which] are serious crimes under international law and are prohibited at all times under both international human rights law and international humanitarian law."^{xxxiii}

In addition, the recent detentions of humanitarian and civil society workers, as well as those conducted since 2021, clearly violate the right to due process. Yemeni law dictates that detainees be presented before a court of law within 24 hours of their arrest, that they are allowed to hire a lawyer and maintain communication with their families. Detainees are to be promptly informed of the charges against them and allowed the opportunity to examine the evidence.

Given the Houthi authorities' well-documented use of torture and ill-treatment against detainees,^{xxxiv} torture remains a serious concern in the cases of the recent detainees as well as those detained since 2021. Under Yemeni law and binding international law, the de facto authorities are under legal obligation to ensure that the detainees are treated with dignity and not subjected to torture or any inhumane and degrading treatment.

Finally, Yemen's constitution and Law of Criminal Procedures forbid forced confession during interrogation. The confession videos of detainees whom the Houthi authorities allege are members of the "American-Israeli spy network" appear to be staged and were likely coerced.

Recommendations

To the
**Ansar Allah - Houthi
authorities:**

- Immediately and unconditionally release the recently detained UN and NGO employees.
- Cease the incitement campaign against aid and civil society workers, including repeated public statements associating aid and civil society work with espionage.

To the
**UN agencies and
international NGOs
impacted by the
recent, as well as
prior arrests of
Yemeni personnel:**

- Take every possible action to facilitate the release of detained employees, including robust advocacy and diplomatic efforts, and legal support to the detainees and their families, as permitted by security conditions. Yemeni human rights organizations and activists have denounced what they see as the failure of UN agencies, international NGOs, and the international community to secure the release of Yemeni employees detained by the Houthis. “We reject the Houthis’ repressive policy targeting employees of public and private institutions, and the international community’s silence, which represents collusion with this crime,” Amat Salaam al-Hajj, head of the Abductees’ Mothers Association, commented for this report.
- Communicate regularly and transparently with family members of detainees to apprise them of new developments and organizations’ efforts to secure their release. Detainees’ families have complained of poor or nonexistent communication from UN agencies regarding their detained loved ones’ statuses.



AMA protest against the detentions, and the international community’s silence about them, on June 22.

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Appendix – Explanations advanced by Yemeni analysts and civil society leaders for the recent arrest campaign

The Houthis have previously used detainees as bargaining chips. As talks are underway between the Houthis and GoY in Oman, Yemeni analysts and civil society leaders have suggested several explanations for how Houthi authorities might utilize the recent arrests of UN and NGO employees for political ends. In addition, the Houthis may attempt to use the detainees to extract political and financial concessions from each of the impacted organizations separately.^{xxxv}

To pressure the GoY, via its international backers, to reverse recent economic escalations

In recent weeks, the GoY and Houthi authorities have escalated their mutual economic warfare. The GoY suspended the work of six major banks in Sana'a for failing to relocate their headquarters to Aden as requested.^{xxxvi} The GoY also issued decisions requiring travel agencies and communications companies to relocate to Aden.^{xxxvii}

Houthi media and officials have described this economic escalation, particularly the bank suspensions, as driven by the US.^{xxxviii} They allege the US is exerting its influence on the GoY to punish the Houthis for their actions in support of the Palestinian cause. Nor are these claims necessarily without merit. Bloomberg reported on June 6, citing “four people with direct knowledge of the situation,” that the US and Western allies are supporting the GoY’s bank suspensions in tandem with American efforts to pause certain elements of the UN’s peace plan in Yemen, until the Houthis cease their attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea.^{xxxix}

In this context, some Yemeni analysts and civil society leaders have suggested that the arrests of UN and NGO employees might be an attempt to pressure the GoY to reverse its recent economic escalations.^{xl} Under this logic, the GoY would presumably be pressured to halt the recent escalatory moves by its international backers including Saudi Arabia and the US.^{xli}

Other analysts have argued that the alleged “spy network” bust, and recent arrests are intended to pressure the US and Britain to stop airstrikes and sanctions against the Houthis.^{xlii}

To pressure the UN and NGOs not to relocate headquarters to Aden

The GoY’s recent escalatory moves include ramping up pressure on humanitarian organizations, and international NGOs, to relocate their headquarters to Aden.^{xliii} This is a longstanding GoY demand but in the first half of 2024 the GoY took several measures aimed at enforcing compliance, including a general directive issued in February by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation.^{xliv}

In an interview on April 5, the deputy minister of International Planning and Cooperation said 107 international and UN organizations had opened offices in Aden in response to GoY requests.^{xlv} This includes the international NGO Care, which opened its headquarters in Aden in April.^{xlvi} The same month UNDP opened a new building in Aden.^{xlvii} However, according to press statements by the agent of the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Mansour Zayd on June 4, UN agencies were still refusing to relocate headquarters to Aden.^{xlviii}

In this context, the recent wave of arrests targeting employees of UN agencies and international NGOs could be an attempt to pressure these organizations not to relocate from Sana'a to Aden. An unnamed official inside UN OCHA told news website al-Nkkar that the arrests “are a form of pressure on the UN agencies to stop any intention of moving from Sana'a to Aden.”^{xlix} This analysis was echoed by the head of the NGO Masar.^l UN agencies’ activity is an important source of hard currency in northern Yemen, while the Houthi’s diversion of a significant portion of humanitarian aid, to shore up political power and punish dissent, is well documented.^{li}

Endnotes

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