



Justice4Yemen Pact
ميثاق العدالة لليمن

ADVOCACY BRIEF

Death Sentences against Yemeni Journalists Released from Detention Represent Miscarriage of Justice **Requiring UN Intervention**

About the Justice4Yemen Pact

The Justice4Yemen Pact represents 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 Justice4Yemen Pact is guided by the principles of respect for human dignity, equality, justice, and non-discrimination. We believe that by working together, we can end impunity, provide meaningful support and redress for victims, and contribute to a more peaceful, just, and prosperous future for Yemen.

About the Media Freedom Observatory

The Media Freedom Observatory is the first platform specialized in monitoring violations against Yemeni journalists, championing their cases locally and internationally, and publishing available information on press freedoms. The Observatory publishes regular reports that provide a comprehensive view of the media landscape in Yemen, with the aim creating a safer media environment and combatting impunity. In addition, the Observatory provides emergency legal, psychological, and cybersecurity services to journalists. The Observatory is part of the Studies and Economic Media Center (SEMC), a member of the Justice 4 Yemen Pact.



Case Summary

In a recent interview with the Media Freedom Observatory, three journalists released from Houthi detention in accordance with a UN-sponsored deal say they have targets on their backs due to death sentences issued against them. The Media Freedom Observatory and Justice4Yemen Pact call on the office of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen to pressure the Houthis to cancel death sentences against detainees released in prisoner swaps.

“Because of the ongoing trial against me by the Houthis I feel under constant threat, like the death sentence is hanging above my head. I’m living in fear that this ruling will be carried out at any moment,” Yemeni journalist **Tawfiq Mohammed Al-Mansouri** told the Media Freedom Observatory.



Tawfiq Mohammed Al-Mansouri

Source: [Media Freedom observatory-Yemen](#)

Al-Mansouri's plight is shared by three colleagues who were arrested alongside him by Houthi (Ansar Allah) forces in 2015 against the backdrop of their journalism. [Over the next eight years](#) the journalists were subjected to enforced disappearance, torture, and an unfair trial following which they were sentenced to death. They were subsequently released in a prisoner exchange deal negotiated between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government of Yemen under UN and ICRC auspices.

However, their arrival at the Tadawin Military Airport in Marib on April 16, 2023, and their reunion with their loved ones, did not mark the end of their ordeal. A year later the Specialized Criminal Appeals Court in Sana'a issued a ruling to return the journalists' legal file to the prosecution, marking an end to their long-running appeals process. The previous death sentences against them remain in effect, according to the journalists' lawyer Abdul Majeed Sabra.

The Observatory recently spoke to Sabra and three of the four released journalists. The fourth journalist [Al-Hareth Saleh Hamid](#) was not available for comment as of this report's publication.

"There has been no final ruling to close the case file, and we cannot predict what will happen until after we receive a copy of the ruling and evaluate and study it," the lawyer Sabra said, remarking on the Appeals Court ruling.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding their legal case, the journalists told the Observatory they have targets on their backs because the death sentences against them remain active.



Al-Hareth Saleh Hamid

Source: [Media Freedom observatory-Yemen](#)

"Every decision issued by the Houthi (Ansar Allah) courts is not a ruling, but rather a religious *fatwa*, including execution orders that are intended to be fully implemented," said the journalist [Abdulkhaleq Ahmed Amran](#).

"Their ongoing pursuit of us, their threats to eliminate us, are a form of revenge, and an attempt to terrify and shut us up, against the backdrop of our prominent media and rights-based activities after our release, as we exposed their crimes and violations against journalists and journalism," added Umran.

Since their release the journalists have repeatedly talked to the media about their painful experience in Houthi detention, and last June they sent a letter to the UN's Special Envoy to Yemen demanding he hold accountable Abdul Qader al-Murtada. The journalists wrote that al-Murtada, who heads the Houthi negotiating committee in talks to free wartime detainees, directly participated



Abdulkhaleq Ahmed Amran

Source: [Media Freedom observatory-Yemen](#)

in torturing them in prison.

Journalist **Akram Saleh Al-Waleedi** likens the active death sentence against him to “a heavy shadow that does not leave me, and carries the burden of vigilance and fear.”

Al-Waleedi continues, “From a security standpoint, I’m constantly in a state of anxiety and caution, I watch my steps as if I’m moving in a minefield. Psychologically this is no ordinary trial. It’s a psychological war in which my strength is being sapped, my spirit is heavy with pain and tension, I find myself trapped between walls of doubt and fear.”



Akram Saleh Al-Waleedi

Source: [Media Freedom observatory-Yemen](#)

Fifty-four journalists have been killed during Yemen’s war as documented by the Media Freedom Observatory, including several journalists killed in targeted assassinations thought to be carried out by the Houthis. For example, journalist Rasha al-Harazi was killed in a car bomb attack in Aden in November 2021; her husband, journalist Mahmoud al-Atmi, was badly injured in the same incident. [Al-Atmi told the UAE’s The National](#) that the Houthis targeted him because he had covered their repression of civilians, and that prior to the attack Houthi militants were collecting information on his address, movements, and type of car.

Undermining UN-sponsored deals

Al-Masdar Online [reported](#) early last month that Houthi courts had issued death sentences against 12 former detainees released in accordance with international prisoner exchange deals supervised by the UN and the ICRC, in addition to the active death sentences against the four journalists. Al-Masdar wrote that these sentences “are likely to weaken confidence in mediation efforts and hamper the role of the UN and its special envoy [to Yemen] to solve the extremely complicated detainee file.”

Journalist Abdul Khaleq Umran shares that view, telling the Observatory that “The continuation of the so-called trial against me undermines the prisoner and detainee exchange agreement supervised by the UN special envoy to Yemen and the ICRC on April 16, 2024.” Umran called for “international protection from the religious *fatwas* sentencing us journalists to death, as the Houthi group has a violent, doctrinal position towards journalists, they classify journalists as their number one enemy and getting rid of journalists is holy war.”

The Justice4Yemen Pact coalition reached out to the UN Special Envoy’s Office for comment regarding the Houthi authorities’ issuing of death sentences against individuals included in UN-sponsored prisoner exchange deals; however, as of the publication of this report, no response has been received.

In addition to Umran, the two other journalists who spoke to the Observatory also expressed their hope the international community will stand with them in fighting these death sentences.

“My experience shows that there is a pressing need to protect human rights and journalistic freedoms in Yemen,” said Tawfiq al-Mansouri. “I hope the international community realizes that what I’m facing is part of a wider campaign to silence free voices in the country, and that it takes concrete action to support journalists and human rights defenders facing similar threats, and to ensure those who have committed crimes against journalists do not escape punishment,” he adds.

“Justice is not merely a slogan, it’s a right that needs to be protected in every time and place,” said Akram al-Waleedi. “The world cannot turn its back on injustice wherever it may be. My cause is not an individual cause, rather it’s a part of a wider struggle on behalf of freedom of expression and human dignity.”

Recommendations

Given the above, the Observatory of Media Freedoms, and the Justice4Yemen Pact Coalition, call upon the office of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, the country office of the OHCHR in Yemen, and organizations concerned with freedom of expression and human rights, to take the following actions:

To the office of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen:	Pressure the Houthis to cancel death sentences issued against former detainees released in accordance with prisoner exchange deals, and abstain from issuing such sentences in the future, given the injustice these sentences visit upon released detainees, and the fact that they undermine confidence in the role of mediators.
To the OHCHR country office, and international NGOs working on human rights in Yemen:	Establish a monitoring mechanism to produce regular reports on the status of former detainees released in accordance with prisoner exchange deals, to strengthen accountability and transparency and ensure their safety.
To the local, and international NGOs concerned with freedom of expression in Yemen:	Implement recommendations from the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity . Provide legal and humanitarian support to previously detained journalists who are facing death sentences.

Background on the case

On June 9, 2015, nine journalists were arbitrarily arrested and disappeared by Houthi militants, following which they were subjected to physical and psychological torture, and denied family visits and appropriate medical care. According to previous interviews with the journalists by the Media Freedom Observatory, published in a [video report](#) titled “Cells of Slow Death,” their detention conditions were deplorable. The journalists reported being held in solitary confinement for extended periods of time in small, unventilated rooms called “pressure chambers,” beaten with sticks, electrocuted, suffocated, and threatened with execution.

In addition, their lawyers were prevented from attending court sessions or representing the journalists during interrogations. Houthi authorities tried the journalists on charges of espionage and publishing fake news in a manner that lacked the most basic fair trial guarantees, according to the documentation of numerous rights groups including [The Observatory](#) and [Amnesty International](#).

In April 2020, the Houthi-run Specialized Criminal Court in Sana’a—which is specialized in state security and terrorism cases, not journalism cases—issued death sentences against four of the nine detained journalists in connection with their journalistic work: Abdul Khaleq Umran, Akram al-Waleedi, Harith Humaid, and Tawfiq al-Mansouri. The court also convicted the five other journalists—Hisham Tartoum, Hisham al-Yusifi, Haytham al-Shihab, Assam Belghayth, and Hassan Annab—of the charges leveled against them, sentencing them to time served.

A year later, following sustained advocacy campaigns by local and international NGOs, the Houthis agreed to release the four journalists sentenced to death as part of a prisoner exchange deal between the Yemeni government and Houthis, under the supervision of the UN and ICRC.

However, the Houthis resumed the legal case against the journalists following the deal’s completion, thereby striking a severe blow against justice and human rights and contradicting international efforts to strengthen freedom of expression in Yemen.

A most dangerous profession

Yemen ranks 154 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, indicating the range of violations journalists are subjected at the hands of all parties to the conflict.

The Media Freedom Observatory documented 2,515 violations against journalists from 2015 to 2021 committed by all parties to the conflict in Yemen. These included 54 cases of murder, 484 arrests, and 157 violations against media institutions. In addition, 165 media outlets shut down during the war, as Yemen's economic crisis undermined their ability to continue operating or to transfer their headquarters to safer areas, according to a recent study by the Studies and Economic Media Center.

Statistics collected by the Observatory indicate that the Houthis committed the highest share of violations against the Yemeni press since 2015. These violations were systematic, beginning with the takeover of official media institutions, followed by the shuttering of independent or political party outlets not connected to the Houthis. During a televised speech in 2019, the head of the Houthi group, Abdul Malek al-Houthi, incited people against journalists directly and said journalists were more dangerous than armed soldiers.

A joint statement by forty NGOs concerned with freedom of expression on 2024 World Press Freedom Day emphasized that most violations against journalists in Yemen have gone unpunished. The announcement attributed this impunity to the fact that the international community's limited engagement in Yemen prioritizes political considerations, as well as a lack of Yemeni political will to address violations against journalists, and the weakness of the Yemeni judiciary.

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.

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