Checkpoint Killings:

A Constant Scourge in Yemen's War

Justice4Yemen Pact
ميثاق العدالة لليمن

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About the 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.
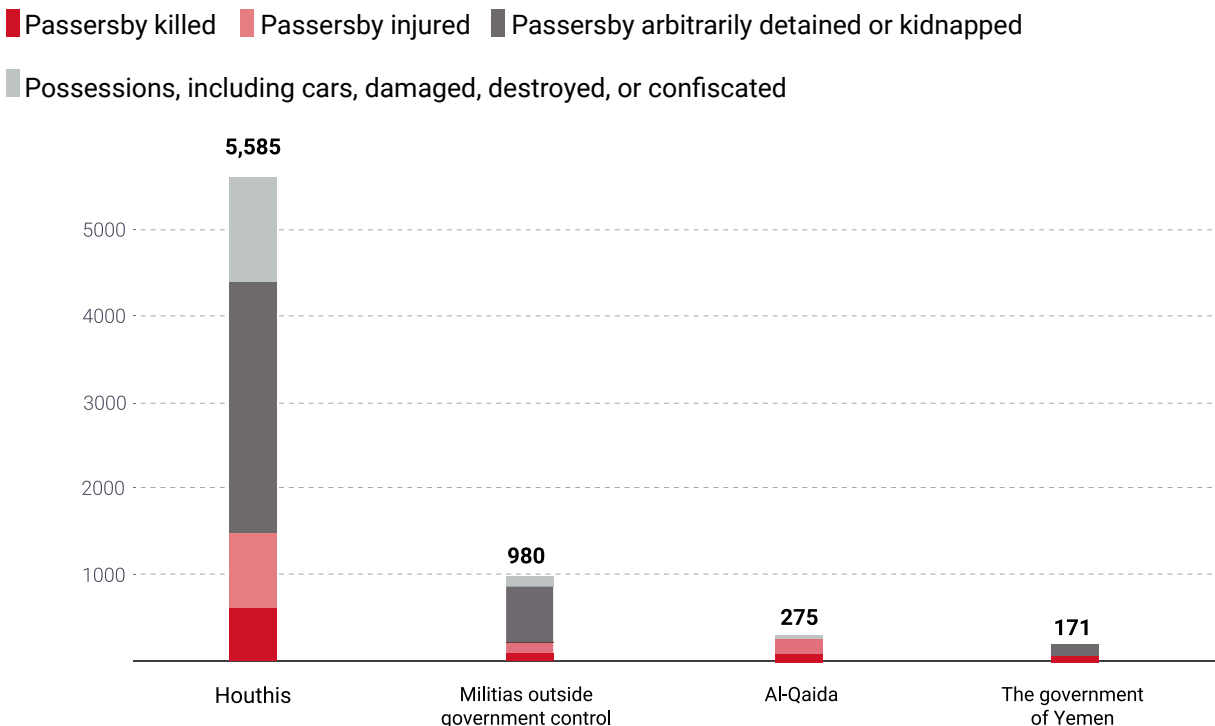
Acknowledgement

Introduction

During the war in Yemen, conflict parties have established a multitude of checkpoints governing access to, and movement within, their zones of control. [i] While these checkpoints are ostensibly intended to maintain order and security, they are often the site of serious crimes and human rights violations against passersby. Rights groups, Yemeni media, and UN monitoring mechanisms have extensively documented civilians and humanitarian actors falling prey to extortion, unlawful detention, insulting treatment, and murder at the hands of checkpoint guards.[ii]

The Netherlands-based Rights Radar released a 2023 study on checkpoint violations in Yemen demonstrating that all warring parties are responsible for these abuses.[iii] The Houthis bore responsibility for the largest share of documented incidents, as the following chart shows:

Checkpoint violations in Yemen 2014-2021, by actor and violation type

As documented by Rights Radar

■ Passersby killed ■ Passersby injured ■ Passersby arbitrarily detained or kidnapped

■ Possessions, including cars, damaged, destroyed, or confiscated

These incidents were documented primarily based on complaints submitted to Rights Radar, as well as field interviews with victims, family members, and eyewitnesses.
Source: "Yemen: Checkpoints of Death," Rights Radar, February 2023, page 39 • Created with Datawrapper

The most serious of these violations – killing – is the focus of this brief, which was developed in collaboration with partner organization SAM for Rights and Liberties. The brief begins by describing predominant types of checkpoint killings documented during the Yemeni war. Next, it discusses the local context in al-Bayda governorate, where Rights Radar documented the highest number of checkpoint violations in its 2023 study. Finally, the brief discusses a recent, emblematic case documented by SAM, of two young men killed at a al-Bayda checkpoint in August 2024.

Types of checkpoint killings

A review of checkpoint killings documented by Yemeni media, rights groups, and UN mechanisms[iv] indicate several predominant violation types:

1. Passersby who fail to slow down, stop, or identify themselves when approaching or passing a checkpoint, leading guards to open fire. In certain cases, guards shoot passersby from behind once they have already cleared the checkpoint.

Source: Al-Masdar Online

Example: **Salem Abdullah Sael al-Khalifi,** killed on July 3, 2024, as he was returning home from his job as a physician assistant at the Shabwa General Hospital Authority. The STC-affiliated force in control of the checkpoint stated that he failed to stop or identify himself and was shot as he sped by.[v] A local journalist who closely followed the case reported that al-Khalifi passed the same checkpoint every day at the same time and knew the guards.[vi]

2. Passersby who get into altercations with checkpoint guards—for example over insulting treatment, or for refusing to pay a bribe—and these altercations spiral into a gunfight or execution.
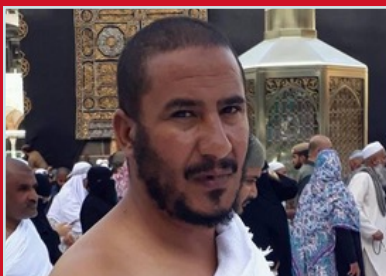
Source: Facebook

Example: **Sultan Ali Ali Dhafran,** killed on March 29, 2019, at a Houthi checkpoint in Amran governorate. Dhafran was transporting firewood for sale with his two sons when he passed the checkpoint and refused to pay a bribe. Houthi soldiers from the checkpoint pursued him and shot out his tires. When Dhafran emerged from his car in surrender, they executed him in front of his sons, according to two eyewitnesses who spoke to Rights Radar.[vii]

Checkpoint killings: a constant scourge in Yemen's war

3. Passersby who are abducted by checkpoint guards and later killed.

Source: Mwatana

Example: **Abdul Malek al-Sinbani,** abducted on September 8, 2021, at a checkpoint in Lahij as he was returning from the United States to visit his family in Sana'a. Al-Sinbani was taken by checkpoint guards with the 9th Elite Strike Forces affiliated with the STC. They stole $50,000 from al-Sinbani, tortured and shot him before dumping him in front of a hospital where he died of his wounds.[viii] After the case received widespread attention the perpetrators were arrested and tried in military court. Four were found innocent and the fifth was found guilty of manslaughter, although his one-year jail sentence was suspended.[ix]

Al-Bayda governorate as a focal point for checkpoint violations

Since the Houthis entered al-Bayda in late 2014 they have struggled to subdue the governorate's tribes. Some tribesmen have fought alongside the internationally-recognized government against them,[x] while in areas of Houthi control, intermittent clashes have erupted between security forces and local tribesmen for many reasons.[1] Residents of al-Bayda have cited the area's historical resistance to Yemen's Zaydi Imamate—which is thought to animate today's Houthi movement—as a factor encouraging resistance to Houthi rule, and the corresponding Houthi repression.[xi] In addition, the Houthis have fought an ongoing campaign against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula in al-Bayda.[xii]
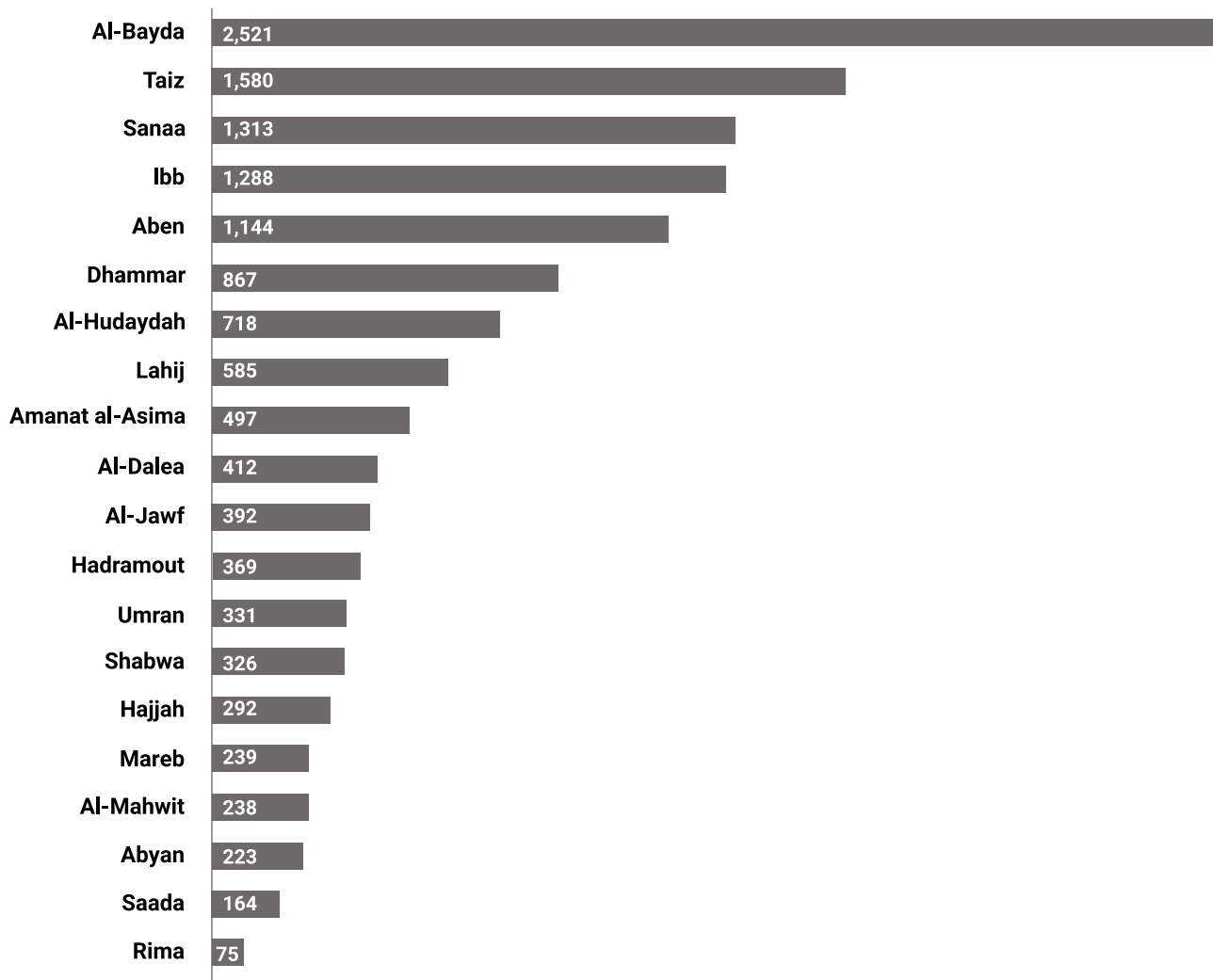
Given the friction between the Houthis and residents, and the anti-insurgency campaign, it is perhaps unsurprising that al-Bayda was ranked first by Rights Radar in its 2023 study of checkpoint violations:

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1 For example, in 2018 Al Ghlays tribesmen killed and wounded several Houthi soldiers who reportedly tried to take over their land. Two years later, the Al Awwadh tribes battled the Houthis following security services' killing of a local woman. In 2021, three Houthi soldiers were killed in murky circumstances at a checkpoint, leading to clashes with tribesmen from the nearby town of al-Khubza. The ensuing Houthi siege and bombardment of al-Khubza killed 10 civilians, according to SAM.

Checkpoint violations in Yemen 2014-2021, by governorate

As documented by Rights Radar

Governorate	Violations
Al-Bayda	2,521
Taiz	1,580
Sanaa	1,313
Ibb	1,288
Aben	1,144
Dhammar	867
Al-Hudaydah	718
Lahij	585
Amanat al-Asima	497
Al-Dalea	412
Al-Jawf	392
Hadramout	369
Umran	331
Shabwa	326
Hajjah	292
Mareb	239
Al-Mahwit	238
Abyan	223
Saada	164
Rima	75

These incidents were documented primarily based on complaints submitted to Rights Radar, as well as field interviews with victims, family members, and eyewitnesses.

Source: "Yemen: Checkpoints of Death," Rights Radar, February 2023, page 26 • Created with Datawrapper

In August 2024, a checkpoint killing in al-Bayda shook the town of Hammat Sarrar and prompted residents to attack, and kill, three Houthi soldiers. SAM documented this incident by conducting seven interviews with town residents and tribal notables, including one individual who witnessed the immediate aftermath of the checkpoint killing. In addition, the organization reviewed video evidence and pictures of the civilians killed and property damaged in the town. The Hammat Sarrar incident was selected to highlight the scourge of checkpoint killings because it is relatively recent, had serious consequences for the area, and reflects the predominant killing types presented earlier.

Hammat Sarrar incident

On the morning of August 7, Muqbel al-Sarrari and his friend, Merdas al-Sarrari, were shot as they passed a Houthi checkpoint in the village of Hammat Sarrar. Exactly what happened during the shooting is uncertain due to the conflicting accounts offered by sources, and because no videos or photographs of the incident have surfaced.

According to Hammat Sarrar residents who spoke to SAM, Muqbel al-Sarrari passed the Houthi checkpoint without stopping, prompting the Houthi guards to open fire and wound him—he later succumbed to his wounds at a hospital in Radaa. Merdas dismounted from his motorcycle to help his friend at which point the guards shot him as well. One of the bullets struck Merdas in the head, killing him instantly.

Other sources, including the Yemeni Ministry of Legal Affairs and Human Rights (affiliated with the internationally recognized government), offered similar accounts of the killing.[xiii]

Yemeni journalist Fares al-Hamiri reported a different version of events on August 11, citing local residents. Al-Hamiri wrote the Houthi checkpoint tried to stop a group of locals on the basis that they were wanted men, leading to a verbal altercation then a firefight, during which the two men were shot.[xiv]

After the shooting, angry residents of Hammat Sarrar attacked the checkpoint guards and pursued them to a nearby mosque that had been turned into a Houthi military base, where the soldiers took shelter in the mosque's minaret.[xv] In the ensuing fighting the wooden stairs to the minaret caught fire. In total, four Houthi soldiers were killed and two town residents injured in the clashes.[xvi]

Subsequently, Houthi reinforcements extracted their casualties from the minaret and besieged the village of Hammat Sarrar.[xvii]
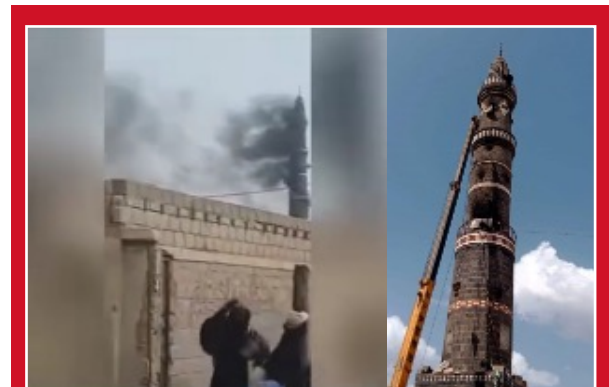
Left: Still from a video of the minaret burning. Source: Sameer Amran, Facebook

Right: Picture of security forces removing the soldiers' bodies using a crane. Source: Osama Hassan Sari, X

According to SAM's documentation, tribal notables intervened to put a stop to the fighting. They negotiated an agreement whereby Houthi security forces withdrew from the outskirts of the village in exchange for residents handing over locals wanted for investigation. The agreement also stipulated that Houthi media enter the village "in order show the matter was settled, and that the village and its residents were on their side, like the [Houthi] group always does," said the SAM monitor who documented the incident.

Houthi version of events

The Houthi police in al-Bayda issued a statement saying that the checkpoint in Hammat Sarrar had come under fire from two people who belong to "takfiri groups," referencing Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaida, and that the checkpoint guards returned fire.[xviii] Houthi outlets like al-Masirah TV and Ansarollah.com also blamed "takfiris" for the attack. [xix] Houthi-aligned journalist Mohammad Sari said al-Qaida was behind the incident.[xx]

March organized by the Houthi authorities in Hammat Sarrar after the fighting, in which the photo of Houthi leader Abdel Malek was raised. Source: al-Maseera

Houthi media described the other reports coming out of Hamat Sarrar as fake news promoted by the enemy to sow division.[xxi] Houthi media published reports in the days after the checkpoint killing about how Hammat Sarrar residents are loyal to the Houthi leader, ideology, and security forces, and denounce the extremist takfiris whom the Houthis say attacked the checkpoint.[xxii]

A SAM report from February 2022 details how Houthi authorities and affiliated media outlets regularly report misleading information to cover up checkpoint violations, for example by claiming that civilian victims of violations are enemy soldiers.[xxiii]

Post from pro-Houthi journalist Osama Sari on the Hammat Sarrar incident, August 9, 2024:

"Al-Qaida members in Qayfa [the area around Hammat Sarrar] are just like the Israelis…They want to kill you, and burn you in the mosque, then hang your bodies from the minaret's windows. And they film it and make an international party celebrating this criminal achievement.

And then the next day, when the state acts out of responsibility to its citizens, to punish the criminals and take revenge for their crime…you find them shouting and crying and denouncing and turning into terrified rats…"

Legal analysis

The Houthi de facto authorities are bound by international human rights law (IHRL) considering they act as the government in areas under their control. [xxiv] The Houthi authorities have acknowledged in official correspondence with the now-disbanded UN Group of Eminent Experts that their forces respect both international humanitarian and human rights law, and they have "referred to the applicability of human rights treaties ratified by the Government of Yemen to their administration." [xxiv]

IHRL strictly prohibits the arbitrary deprivation of life.[xxvi] In the context of law enforcement, lethal force must only be used when strictly necessary, and then in a proportionate manner. Lethal force should be a last resort in response to an imminent threat of death or serious injury.[xxviii] Otherwise, the use of lethal force amounts to arbitrary deprivation of life.[xxix]

Yemen's Police Organization Law of 2000 stipulates that law enforcement officers may only use firearms if they are the only available option to accomplish the goal, and then proportionate force must be used.[xxx] Furthermore, policemen must strive not to fatally injure their target.[xxxi]

There is some uncertainty around the circumstances of the Hammat Sarrar checkpoint shooting. However, based on SAM's documentation, corroborated by reporting from the Ministry of Human Rights and others, Muqbel Sarari was shot for failing to stop as he passed the checkpoint, while his friend Merdas was shot as he rendered first aid. This clearly amounts to arbitrary deprivation of life under international human rights law and an unlawful use of force under Yemen's Police Organization Law. If the two men were shot following an altercation, as reported by journalist Fares al-Hamiri, then whether the incident amounts to arbitrary deprivation of life under IHRL, or unlawful use of force in Yemeni law, depends on the nature of the altercation and ensuing firefight.

More broadly, the repeated checkpoint killings documented in this report show widespread disregard for international and Yemeni law on the part of all main conflict parties.

Recommendations

To the Ansar Allah de facto authorities – Swiftly and impartially investigate documented patterns of abuses at checkpoints in al-Bayda, particularly the Abu Hashem checkpoint at the eastern entrance to Radaa city.[2] Hold perpetrators to account and compensate victims.

To Ansar Allah, the STC, and internationally recognized government of Yemen – Train law enforcement and military units manning checkpoints in relevant Yemeni law concerning the use of force. Approach international organizations like Geneva Call, and the ICRC, to train these units in relevant international law.

To Yemeni human rights organization – Consider compiling incidents of checkpoint violations committed since 2021, when Rights Radar's previous study ended, to draw local and international attention to this ongoing and serious pattern of violations.

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2 The Abu Hashem checkpoint alone was responsible for 1,313 violations documented by Rights Radar in al-Bayda, including 19 killings and 47 woundings. See "Yemen: Checkpoints of Death!", Rights Radar, February 2023, page 42

Appendix A – Checkpoint killings reported by Yemeni media in 2024

Name of victim	Date	Location	Circumstances	Checkpoint affiliation	Source(s)
Jaber Hamad Jareem al-Nufi	November 19, 2024	East of al-Hazm city, al-Jawf governorate	Unclear	Houthi checkpoint	Al-Majhar
Saeed Muhsin al-razeen bin Fahas	October 2, 2024	Khub wa Asshaaf, Al-Jawf governorate	Unclear	Houthi checkpoint	Yemen Shabab
Yahya Muthanna Nasser	September 14, 2024	Sa'wan, Sana'a, Amanat al-Asima governorate	Killed as he was travelling from Hajjah to Sana'a to attend the Prophet's Birthday celebration; circumstances of killing unclear	Houthi checkpoint	Al-Mashhad News
Abdul Rahman Ahmed Shana'	August 12, 2024	Bayhan directorate, Shabwa	Unclear	UAE-backed Giants' Brigade	Southern Yemen.net
Naji Hasel Dawi	July 21, 2024	Between Huth and Harf Safyan, Amran governorate	Unclear	Houthi checkpoint	Abdul Wasia Muhsin al-Jamali via Facebook
Salem Abdullah Sael al-Khalifi	July 3, 2024	Ataq, Shabwa governorate	Killed as he was returning home from his job as a physician assistant in the Shabwa General Hospital Authority. A statement from the militia in control of the checkpoint said al-Khalifi failed to stop or identify himself. A local journalist closely following the case reported that al-Khalifi passed by the same checkpoint every day at the same time, and knew the guards.	Second Brigade – Shabwa Defense (affiliated with STC)	YDN.news, 4May. net, Saleh Haqrus via Facebook
Abdullah Sarman al-Nufi	April 11, 2024	Western al-Jawf governorate	Unclear	Houthi checkpoint	Alnkkar

Shaddad Ahmed Jarada	April 9, 2024	Near Radaa, in al-Bayda governorate	Killed approaching a checkpoint on his motorcycle as he was running an errand.	Houthi checkpoint	Al Mashhad News
Mabrouk Hazzam al-Halali al-Noufi	March 31, 2024	East of al-Hazem, al-Jawf governorate	The checkpoint guards attempted to detain him and confiscate his weapon, leading to an exchange of gunfire during which he was killed.	Houthi checkpoint	Al Mashhad News
Radi Ahmed Awd Alyan	February 7, 2024	Tuban district, al-Lahij governorate	Checkpoint guard demanded a portion of his income as a day laborer; he refused and was shot dead	Affiliated with STC's Security Belt forces	Al-Mushahid

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i "Yemen: Checkpoints of Death!", Rights Radar, February 2023, pages 6-13, https://tinyurl.com/5n7stukk; "Checkpoints of Fear, and Fraudulent Media," SAM for Rights and Liberties, February 2022, page 6, https://tinyurl.com/ms2bcttr; "The War on Yemen's Roads," Casey Coombs and Salah Ali Salah, Sana'a Center, January 16, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/58v5dk2x

ii For rights groups' reports, see: "Yemen: Checkpoints of Death!", Rights Radar; "Checkpoints of Fear, and Fraudulent Media," SAM for Rights and Liberties

For local media reports, see: Appendix A

For UN mechanisms, see:

Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen – A/HRC/42/CRP.1, 29 September 2020, paragraph 104

Panel of Experts on Yemen – S/2023/833, 2 November 2023, paragraphs 151, 171; S/2023/130, 21 February 2023, paragraphs 81, 108.d; S/2022/50, 26 January 2021, paragraphs 30, 108, 137, 141; S/2019/83, 25 January 2019, paragraph 164; S/2018/68, 26 January 2018, Annex 65, paragraphs 18-19

iii "Yemen: Checkpoints of Death!", Rights Radar

iv See endnote ii

v "Shabwa defense clarifies the killing of the citizen 'Bin Sayel' at one of the entrances to Ataq," 4may.net, July 7, 2024, https://www.4may.net/news/117206

vi Post by journalist Saleh Haqrus on Facebook, July 19, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/2s3w7eca

vii "Yemen: Checkpoints of Death!", Rights Radar, page 60

viii "Military ruling in the murder of al-Sinbani proves a policy of non-accountability," SAM for Rights and Liberties, October 13, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/bc5vjutx; "Justice requires the accused to be tried in court," Mwatana, October 5, 2021, https://www.mwatana.org/posts/al-sanabani

ix "Political activist criticizes the ruling in the case of the murder of young al-Sinbani," Aden al-Ghad, October 12, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yxbt7rmw

x "Yemen: dead and wounded in clashes in al-Bayda," Sky News Arabia, 11 February 2015, https://tinyurl.com/yeyt96t9; "Houthi soldiers killed in clashes with tribal militants," al-Jazeera, October 27, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/htmnmv7f; "Violent clashes between Houthi militants and Al Hmayqan tribesmen in al-Bayda," Yemen Future, November 28, 2020, https://yemenfuture.net/news/1

xi "How is the Houthi militia trying to subdue the tribes of al-Bayda with armed force?", Belqees TV, August 9, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/bdfzzvz9; "Al-Bayda's Hammat Sarrar...where have tribal mediations landed, and what are the tribes' options?", Belqees TV, August 12, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/2t3z44dk;

xii "Our Common Enemy: Ambiguous Ties Between al-Qaeda and Yemen's Tribes," Nadwa al-Dawsari, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, January 11, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/4dw8v38h

xiii Post on Facebook, Ministry of Legal Affairs and Human Rights, November 2, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/fuck-t7ru; "Yemen Joint Monitoring Report," ACAPS, September 2024, https://tinyurl.com/ycxz69p3

xiv Post on X (formerly Twitter), Fares Alhemyari, August 11, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/4wvpxvut

xv "The Houthi siege of Hammat Sarrar is a new addition to the group's list of oppression against al-Bayda residents," SAM for Rights and Liberties, August 11, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/2tbthvnp

xvi "Al-Bayda...funeral for four martyrs from the central security forces," Saba.ye, August 15, 2024, https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3359434.htm; "The Houthi siege of Hammat Sarrar is a new addition to the group's list of oppression against al-Bayda residents," SAM for Rights and Liberties

xvii Post on Facebook, Office of Media and Public Relations in Radaa, August 11, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/4swjcwkf; "The Houthi siege of Hammat Sarrar is a new addition to the group's list of oppression against al-Bayda residents," SAM for Rights and Liberties

xviii Post on Facebook, Office of Media and Public Relations in Radaa

xix "Watch – Demonstration in Hammat Sarrar announcing the problem is over and condemning the criminal acts," al-Masirah TV, August 13, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/53w8per7; "Al-Bayda: Residents of Hammat Sarrar in Wald Rabia' hold tribal gathering to denounce the criminal assault on a security force by takfiri militants," Ansarollah.com, August 13, 2024, https://www.ansarollah.com.ye/archives/702674

xx Post on x (formerly Twitter), Osama Hassan Sari, August 9, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/4tydu6u8

xxi "Announcement from the tribes' meeting in al-Bayda: we condemn the misleading media campaign by the mouthpieces of the American-Saudi aggression," Ansarollah.com, August 13, 2024, https://www.ansarollah.com.ye/archives/702677; "Watch – Demonstration in Hammat Sarrar announcing the problem is over and condemning the criminal acts," al-Masirah TV

xxii "Announcement from the tribes' meeting in Hammat al-Sarrar in al-Bayda: We emphasize that the leadership is wise, and that locals are aware they must rob the forces of the Aggression, and the hypocrites, of this opportunity," Ansarollah.com, August 13, 2024, https://www.ansarollah.com.ye/archives/702683; "Al-Bayda: Hammat Sarrar tribes announce in a large meeting they totally stand with the security forces to maintain security and stability in the governorate," August 13, 2024, https://www.ansarollah.com.ye/archives/702679; Watch – Demonstration in Hammat Sarrar announcing the problem is over and condemning the criminal acts," al-Masirah TV

xxiii "Checkpoints of Fear, and Fraudulent Media," SAM for Rights and Liberties

xxiv A/HRC/42/CRP.1, Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, 3 September 2019, paragraph 82

xxv A/HRC/45/CRP.7, Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen, 29 September 2020, footnote15

xxvi International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 6.1

xxvii A/HRC/42/CRP.1, paragraph 612

xxviii A/HRC/42/CRP.1, paragraph 612

xxix A/HRC/42/CRP.1, paragraph 612

xxx Law number 15 of 2000, Concerning Police Organization, article 10, available at: http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/arabic/Yemeni_Laws/Yemeni_Laws112.pdf

xxxi Law number 15 of 2000, Concerning Police Organization, article 10

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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