

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Yemen: Opposition targeted, detained arbitrarily and kidnapped by Huthis and Saleh-loyalists**

A surge in arbitrary arrests, detentions and abductions carried out by the Huthi armed group and allied forces loyal to former President 'Ali 'Abdullah Saleh recorded by Amnesty International provide compelling evidence of the extensive targeting of their opponents in Yemen since the beginning of the Saudi Arabian-led coalition airstrikes.

Scores of people from various political backgrounds across the country have been detained arbitrarily or abducted since the start of the Saudi-led Coalition airstrikes on 26 March, the majority of whom are members of al-Islah, a Sunni Islamist political party. According to information gathered by Amnesty International, more than 60 people have been arrested in the cities of Sana'a, the capital, and Ibb, in central Yemen, over the past two months alone as part of a sweeping crackdown against journalists and activists who have opposed the Huthi take-over of government institutions and certain political figures in the al-Islah leadership that did not criticise the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes.

Amnesty International interviewed dozens of former detainees and the families of detainees in the cities of Sana'a and Ibb who had been arbitrarily arrested without a prior arrest warrant and held incommunicado in unknown locations without access to their families. However, some families and former detainees refused to be interviewed because of reprisal fears from the Huthis. In many cases individuals were taken from their homes after Huthis and Saleh-loyalists forced their way into their homes. Many have been held in multiple locations including unofficial detention centres such as private homes, without being given the chance to challenge the lawfulness of their detention or being informed of the reason for their detention.

### **Arbitrary and incommunicado detention of members of al-Islah in Sana'a**

The majority of former detainees and the families of detainees held since 26 March are affiliated with the al-Islah Party and its leadership. The cases below illustrate the fear and uncertainty experienced by victims of abduction and arbitrary detention and their families.

Siblings al-Hassan and al-Hussein Dammaj, aged 30 and 29 respectively, told Amnesty International how their father Mohamed Hasan Dammaj, 77 years old, was taken from his home in al-Rawdha district in Sana'a at 7AM on 6 April without an official arrest warrant. Mohamed Hasan Dammaj is a member of the Shura Council and member of the Supreme Council in the al-Islah Party:

“A fleet of five military vehicles arrived packed with armed soldiers and members of Ansarullah (the Huthi political wing). They searched the house and they initially took me, my father and two other relatives to Raslan Police Station where they interrogated us about what we do and what our position regarding the Saudi-led coalition is. They released us on 10 April at 5PM, with the exception of my father, who was taken to an unknown location. Upon release, they made us sign a document which condemned the Saudi-led coalition war on Yemen,” said al-Hassan.

“After 16 days of no communication or news from our father, an unknown number called me and said to speak to my father,” said al-Hussein. “I spoke to my father and he informed me that he was being held in Nogm Mountain inside an arms depot while the airstrikes were hitting the very same mountain and its surroundings. We have not heard anything from him since. Meanwhile, his wife has passed away while he has been in detention and he was not able to say his goodbye.”

Abdelrahman al-Ansi also told Amnesty International of the targeting of other family members who are not involved in the al-Islah Party, as a way of reaching and then arresting senior members of the party. He spoke of the detention of his brother Yasser al-Ansi, 40 years old, after he finished praying at the mosque at approximately 7PM on 6 April: “The Huthis arrived in cars and took him away claiming that they just wanted to question him and bring him home. He was initially taken to 14 October Police Station where he was held for three days. Thereafter, he was taken to an unknown location. We have received unconfirmed reports that he is being held at the Political Security Office, but we have not been able to speak to him or see him since his arrest. We have tried communicating with the Huthi leadership but they have not been responsive. His disappearance has been hardest on my mother because they are close, she is stricken with worry which has affected her health.”

“My cousin Mohamed Abdelwahab al-Ansi (35 years old) was also arrested on 7 April after the Huthis raided his house. He is not even an al-Islah Party member, he was only detained because his father is the Secretary General of the al-Islah Party. He is being held in the Criminal Investigation Department in Sana’a,” added Abdelrahman.

The son of Fathi Mohamed Abdullah al-‘Ezib (53 years old), a member of the secretariat of the al-Islah Party, recounted how his father was taken away before his eyes at approximately 7PM on 5 April: “A Hylux car and another vehicle arrived at the al-Taqwa Mosque in Bir al-Ziqar after prayer and we demanded to see an arrest warrant but they did not have one, and they proceeded to take him away regardless. He was held in al-Thawra Security Administration for one day and then he was transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department in Sana’a. He was then transferred to an unknown location and we were only allowed to visit him recently. He is currently being held in one of the private homes of ‘Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (a former major general of the Yemeni army and prominent figure in al-Islah Party in Haddah district,” said Farouq Fathi al-‘Ezib.

Several families confirmed that their relatives were similarly being held illegally in unofficial detention centres. Members of the family of Mohamed Qahtan (56 years old), a member of the Supreme Council of the al-Islah Party, also confirmed that after his arrest in the afternoon of 4 April from his home in al-Nahdha District in Sana’a, they were

permitted to visit him once on 7 April where he was being held in the house of Hameed al-Ahmar (a prominent businessman and a leading member of al-Islah Party). Directly prior to his arrest, Mohamed Qahtan had been placed under house arrest by the Huthis for a week.

Other families spoke of relatives who had been detained while they were traveling around the country or trying to leave Yemen. Abdeljalil Said (58 years old), head of the Planning Department in the al-Islah Party, was arrested on 11 May en route to Ta'iz with his wife and his 12-year-old daughter by members of Ansarullah at al-Suhool checkpoint in Ibb. According to family members, he was taken to a Tourist Resort Compound in Ibb, which is being used by the Huthis as a detention centre. According to the family of Abdelmajeed Seif al-Mikhlaifi (57 years old), also an al-Islah Party member, he and his son Fikri Abdelmajeed al-Mikhlaifi (34 years old) were detained en route to Saudi Arabia when they were stopped and arrested by the Huthis at a checkpoint in Haradh on 18 April. The family has not heard from them since 20 April and it is unknown where they are being held.

### **Raids of homes of al-Islah members and targeting of peaceful activists in Ibb**

A similar pattern of arrests and house-raids have taken place in Ibb over the last six weeks. Members of the al-Islah Party, along with independent political activists have been targeted as well as their families.

Abu Ahmed from al-Dhihar Directorate in Ibb told Amnesty International about the arrest of his son Ahmed Ali Abdellatif al-Taheri (31 years-old), father to four-month-old baby Sam: "They took my son Ahmed after an airstrike on 12 April. The Huthis raided houses in the neighbourhood and were looking for him by name, they took no one else from the neighbourhood. He is a pharmacist and the head of the 2011 Revolution Council and he has vehemently come out and rejected the Huthis. This is the second time he was arrested in the last three months."

Similarly, Abdelmalik al-Hunai spoke of the 28 April arrest of his brother Said al-Hunai (36 years old). Said al-Hunai, an independent media activist, has not been seen by his family since the day of his arrest. "Since he was taken away, we haven't been able to see him or hear his voice, we couldn't even give him a change of clothes. He is still in the same clothes he was arrested in three weeks ago. He has five young children, the eldest of whom is Ahmed (13 years old) who has epilepsy," said Abdelmalik.

He added: "Anyone who is against them [Huthis] is arrested, they don't care. He is reportedly being held in the Political Security Office in Ibb; but we went and they would not let us see him or confirm that he is there... His wife is beside herself."

There have been cases when the person wanted for arrest has not been found, and the Huthis and Saleh-loyalists instead have detained other family members, including children, in what appears to amount to hostage-taking, or have destroyed the family home in an act of collective punishment. Osamah al-Wasili spoke of how the Huthis raided their family home looking for his father: "The Huthis arrived at 6AM on 11 April looking for my father, who is the main target, but they only found my brother, siblings and mother. My

younger brother Anas, 14 years old, was taken in lieu of my father and held in the Criminal Investigation Department in Ibb for a week. Younes (10 years old), Ilyas (8 years old) and my little sister (5 years old) were stricken with fear when they raided the house.”

According to al-Islah Party members interviewed in Ibb, interrogations carried out during the arrests focused on the Saudi Arabian-led coalition and the party’s position regarding the current war. Hameed al-Shuhri, a father to seven children and a political official in the al-Islah Party in Ibb who was arrested on 11 April for a couple of weeks, recounted his interrogations: “Forty to fifty Huthis encircled my house and took me to the Criminal Investigation Department in Ibb. They demanded to know why I had insulted Abdelmalik al-Huthi [the leader of the Huthis] and asked me what the Islah Party plans are. They only released me on condition that I would condemn Operation Decisive Storm and not criticize the Huthis’ actions. They also forbade me from writing on Facebook.”

Meanwhile, other families have told Amnesty International that the Huthis and Saleh loyalists blow up opposition leader houses when they do not find them, in what would amount to collective punishment. Suleiman al-Hamati, nephew of Sheikh Mohsin al-Hamati, the leader of the al-Islah Party in Ibb, told Amnesty International how the Huthis and Saleh-loyalists came searching for his uncle: “On 4 May, the Huthis and Saleh loyalists arrived looking for my uncle at his house in al-Makhadir. At the time, he was not there and we warned him and he went into hiding. Then we moved the family from the house. He continued to refuse to hand himself in like they [Huthis] demanded and so on 7 May they came back to his house at around 6.50PM. The house was newly built, he has spent a year doing it up and his family and he were just moving into it. They arrived in three cars and one tank. The house was in al-Daleel area next to the main street. They carried five gas cylinders into the house which they apparently opened to let them empty inside the house with the windows closed. They then blew up the house from a distance.”

## **Background**

The Huthis, mostly members of the (northern) Zaidi Shi’a minority, took over some army and security positions in Sana’a in September 2014. By the third week of January 2015 they had attacked military positions, the Presidential compounds and government buildings. This led to the resignation of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and his government and the Huthis becoming the de-facto rulers of the capital and other parts of Yemen.

Since January 2015, the Huthis have been consolidating their hold on Yemen’s capital, Sana’a, and the country as a whole. On 6 February they dissolved parliament and issued a constitutional declaration mandating the creation of a transitional presidential council which will act as a government for an interim period of two years. On 23 March, the conflict between the Huthis, supported by Yemeni army units and some security forces loyal to former President ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Saleh, and the army units loyal to President Hadi, supported by tribes and popular militias intensified in the south of the country which until then had remained outside of Huthi control.

On 26 March, a Saudi Arabian-led military coalition, grouping at least 10 countries, began a campaign of airstrikes against the Huthis in support of the forces loyal to President

Hadi. The first airstrikes hit Huthi targets and military installations, primarily in Sana'a and Sa'dah, north of the country, and later Aden and elsewhere, affecting 18 of the country's 22 governorates thus far.

International humanitarian law, which applies to all parties to an armed conflict, including non-state armed groups such as the Huthis, provides fundamental guarantees for persons deprived of their liberty. These include the requirement of humane treatment and the prohibition of enforced disappearances, the taking of hostages, and arbitrary detention. Collective punishments are also prohibited.<sup>1</sup> Depending on the particular rule in question, many acts that violate these rules will also constitute war crimes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 87-105.

<sup>2</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156, pp. 590-603.