

YEMEN

PRISONS BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF HUMANITY



The Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (GIDHR)

is a non-profit and non-governmental organization based in Australia. Its primary objective is the promotion of the culture of democracy. It also focuses on establishing human rights and social justice principles and halting violations in Gulf states.

The organization meets all legal requirements and has the right to set up branches in other parts of the world while guaranteeing independent financial disclosures. GIDHR's activities are not intended to generate commercial profits.

GIDHR aspires to be a voice among major organizations defending democratic and human rights principles by contributing to achieving peace and justice for all in the Gulf states.

Summary

Through a series of reports, GIDHR has been monitoring the human rights situation in Yemen since the start of the Saudi-led war in March 2015. In this report, the organization provides verified information on a particular category of violations caused by nearly eight years of war in Yemen, which has been led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This war caused thousands of civilian casualties, created a catastrophic humanitarian situation, suppressed public rights and freedoms, and deprived Yemenis of the most basic life necessities.

Since the start of military operations in Yemen, the Saudi and Emirati forces have been deployed to many Yemeni cities, islands, and regions. These deployments resemble a form of direct occupation through which the occupiers control public affairs, exploit resources and wealth, and have actual control over the management of all of the cities' and areas' capabilities.

These cities and areas had fallen under the full control of Saudi and Emirati military leaders and political figures who extended their influence using military and security formations. These were deployed throughout the cities and regions of southern Yemen, several strategic islands, and the city of Marib in the north.

Throughout the war, the Saudi-Emirati coalition took control of the city of Aden and established dozens of secret prisons. They also took control of Hadhramaut and turned Al-Rayyan airport and the port of Dabh into secret prisons. In Shabwa, the Emirati forces turned the Balhaf oil facility into a secret prison.

In Al-Mahrah, Saudi forces disrupted operations at the Al-Ghaydah airport and turned it into a detention center for those opposed to its presence. The forces from the two countries also established detention centers and secret prisons in Abyan, Marib, Al-Mokha, and Socotra Island.

As time went by, voices denouncing the mismanagement of the Saudi and Emirati-controlled cities and regions grew louder.

Reports of violations against the rights and freedoms of the residents became more frequent, revealing an increase in the number of disappearances of activists.

In addition, many residents fell victim to arbitrary arrest campaigns. Reports and investigations carried out by international organizations and human rights activists surfaced. This resulted in the discovery of dozens of secret prisons and illegal detention centers established by Saudi and Emirati forces. These facilities were run by Saudis and Emiratis inside Yemen.

The detainees in these prisons were subjected to the worst forms of humiliation, and the worst methods of torture imaginable.

Residents talked about raids on the homes of citizens at different times, even while they were sleeping. This spread fear and panic among a number of families, especially among women and children.

Some of them had family members kidnapped, including young people and human rights activists. They were taken without any legal and judi-

cial procedures that would have otherwise determined the legality of arrest by judicial agencies overseeing those provinces.

These detainees are usually placed in prisons administered by local authorities for a short time and then transferred to secret prisons and detention centers inside Yemeni cities. Others are transferred outside Yemen to prisons in Abha, Saudi Arabia and even prisons belonging to the UAE in Eritrea and Djibouti.

Meanwhile, the complete closure of all land ports and airports across the governorates and cities in northern Yemen continued. This includes Sana'a International Airport, the main artery of transportation for millions of Yemenis abroad. This forced travelers leaving Yemen to cross cities and areas under the control of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, specifically the cities of Marib, Seiyun, Al-Dhalea, Lahj, and Aden.

Hundreds of travelers were subjected to various arbitrary measures, from the moment they were taken to the detention centers in areas controlled by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates up until the deportation of a number of them to prisons and detention centers located on the territory of Saudi Arabia.

Over time, details began to emerge about the tragic conditions that they were subjected to on a daily basis by their jailers, who lacked any human values.

At the time of writing this report, dozens of families do not know the whereabouts and fate of their children, even after searching for them in many prisons administered by their local authorities.

The families are surprised by statements from those running the prisons who say that their children are "in the custody of the coalition countries."

This spreads terror, anxiety, and fear among the families of the detainees, especially the mothers.

"We want to check on our children and know their fate. There are people who were found dumped near hospitals in the Aden Governorate, and they had bruises on their bodies," one of the mothers said.

GIDHR conducted an investigation into a number of violations that were cited in reports compiled by local and international organizations and committed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in their illegal detention facilities and prisons in southern Yemen.

It also conducted an investigation into reports and appeals of the families who are demanding that the fate of the detainees be disclosed and a cessation of arbitrary practices against them.

The investigation also included the monitoring and studying of the positions and testimonies of local leaders as well as political and human rights activists, which reflect their personal experiences. Through these positions and testimonies, they revealed the truth about the abuse and violations committed by the Emirati and Saudi forces and their local militias.

In light of this, **GIDHR's Yemen researcher** conducted a number of meetings and established contacts with witnesses and victims who were arrested and tortured.

The officer listened to the testimonies of the families of some of the victims. The testimonies painted a painful picture of the suffering the families of the detainees and the forcibly disappeared endured and highlighted one of the most heinous forms of torture that the victims were subjected to.

Some spoke about the torture that they themselves endured. They also testified about the torture that other detainees suffered at the hands of Saudi and Emirati officers and soldiers as well as some Yemenis working in the prisons and detention centers.

✂️ Secret prisons ✂️ and Extrajudicial Detention

Since 2016, GIDHR has been following up on information brought to light by local and international organizations regarding secret prisons and detention centers run by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in southern Yemen. These are considered to be extrajudicial facilities and an explicit violation of all international conventions and norms.

Many of the reports from these organizations revealed numerous facts and confirmed that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have established secret detention centers and prisons in areas controlled by their military forces.

They have converted a number of vital facilities in southern Yemen, including civilian facilities, into secret and extrajudicial detention centers.

They used several armed factions to carry out massive arrest campaigns against residents, especially activists who oppose the presence of Saudi and Emirati forces in their cities and the policies with which they manage the affairs of their regions.¹

During GIDHR's investigation period, the data collected confirmed that the Saudi and Emirati military forces established a large number of secret prisons and detention facilities in (Aden, Marib, Shabwa, Hadramout, Al-Mahrah, Abyan, Mokha, as well as Socotra Island).

¹ [HRW](#): The UAE supports Yemeni forces that have arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared dozens of people during security operations. HRW confirmed that the UAE arms and trains these forces, which ostensibly are going after Yemeni branches of Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). The UAE also runs at least two informal detention facilities, and its officials appear to have ordered the continued detention of people despite release orders, and forcibly disappeared people, including reportedly moving high-profile detainees outside the country.

They were fully operated by Saudi and Emirati military officers and commanders, and include eight secret prisons and detention centers in Aden Governorate – Khor Maksar detention center, the Security Belt Camp detention center in Al-Buraiqa area, Bir Ahmed detention center, Al-Enshaat Camp detention center, the Support Camp detention center, a detention center in Al-Buraiqa area, a detention center in Al-Zhalamat village in Khalaf Al-Buraiqa area, and the Al-Eshreen Camp detention center in Crater.

Furthermore, the data shows the UAE established a prison in the Balhaf Gas Liquefaction Factory in Shabwa Governorate. In Al-Mahrah Governorate, the Saudi forces established a special prison inside Al-Ghaydah Airport, controlled by its military forces.

In addition, they established, developed, and managed other secret prisons and detention centers in Hadramout Governorate, such as Al-Rayyan Prison, located inside Al-Rayyan Airport, Al-Dhabba port detention center, Rabwa detention center, the Republican Palace detention center, and the Ghail bin Yamin detention center, managed by the so-called Hadrami Elite Forces.

The Socotra Island detention center was established in Socotra Island.²

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/22/yemen-uae-backs-abusive-local-forces> For details, please see the Human Rights Watch report

Vital Civilian Facilities Turned into Secret Detention Centers and Prisons

GIDHR sources confirmed that in addition to the dozens of prisons and detention centers that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have established in the camps and barracks of their forces in Yemen, they also established prisons and detention centers inside vital civilian facilities after completely disabling them and depriving the population of the services that these facilities were providing.

At the end of 2017, Saudi Arabia deployed its forces in Al-Mahra governorate bordering Oman and Saudi Arabia and took control of Al-Ghaydah airport and turned it into a detention center belonging to its military forces.

In Hadramout, Al-Rayyan airport was one of the vital facilities that the Emirati forces took control of and turned it into a detention center, which they used to disappear dozens of Yemenis and commit serious violations against them. The UAE still refuses to open the airport, which it has been using as a military base since 2016.

The Balhaf plant for the production of liquefied gas in Shabwa Governorate in southern Yemen is another example of a vital facility being turned into a military barracks for the forces of the coalition countries.

The French newspaper Le Monde revealed the existence of a secret prison in a military base established by the UAE in mid-2017. It occupies part of a gas field in Balhaf city in southern Yemen.

The Balhaf facility for gas liquefaction is the largest investment project in Yemen, with an estimated value of \$5 billion. It is managed by the local Yemen LNG, which is run by the French company Total that contributes 39.6% to it. The facility stopped working during the first months of the military operation after March 2015.

One Charge

Punishable by Disappearance and Torture

GIDHR reviewed information and testimonies provided by Yemeni detainees in Saudi and Emirati-run prisons during its investigation, all of which confirmed that opposing the Saudi and Emirati presence on Yemeni territory as well as rejecting and opposing the policies of the two countries was the only charge leveled against those who were subjected to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture.

At the end of 2017, Saudi Arabia began deploying its forces in Al-Mahra governorate bordering Oman and Saudi Arabia, took control of Al-Ghaydah airport, and turned it into a detention center belonging to its military forces.

According to local residents, all public facilities are under the control of the Saudis, with the Yemeni forces operating under Saudi command. All violations are committed by Saudi soldiers and officers, which causes a rise in discontent and pushes locals to protest and oppose this situation.³

Human Rights Watch confirmed that the Public Prosecution continues to issue orders, demanding the release of people in cases where there isn't enough evidence to detain them.

However, these orders are often not respected, as people who were arrested by the Security Belt Forces remained in detention.

³ Yemeni activists launched a wide electronic campaign on social media to expose the violations against detainees in the Saudi-run secret prisons in Al-Mahra Governorate. Saudi forces also turned Al-Ghaydah International Airport and other areas of the governorate into secret prisons and military barracks, kidnapped opponents, and used force to intimidate residents rejecting their presence on their land.

Their files were with the coalition, and according to the testimonies of some of those who were arrested, the charges brought against them centered on their support and participation in the protest movement against the presence of Saudi forces in their city and their grip on local decision making and resources.

They also said that they were interrogated and tortured based on these charges by Saudi elements and that they were detained in unofficial prisons, including Al-Ghaida Airport, which is supervised by Saudi officers.

The families of some of the detainees confirmed that the Saudi forces had forcibly disappeared their relatives for a period of three to five months, while a number of them were illegally transferred to Saudi Arabia, and no information was provided about their whereabouts.⁴

According to Yemeni human rights activists and journalists, the repression and abuses by the Saudi forces against the residents, especially those who oppose their presence in the city, is particularly prominent in Al-Mahra.

GIDHR points to what writer and journalist **Anis Mansour** said: "The popular movement in Al-Mahrah Governorate revealed the scheme and secret prisons and put Saudi Arabia under an effective and embarrassing popular siege." Mansour asserted that Saudi Arabia is in a situation of "permanent confrontation with the people of Al-Mahrah, and is in a state of permanent anxiety over legitimacy."

⁴ [Michael Page](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch: "Saudi forces and their Yemeni allies' serious abuses against local-Mahra residents is another horror to add to the list of the Saudi-led coalition's unlawful conduct in Yemen. Saudi Arabia is severely harming its reputation with Yemenis when it carries out these abusive practices and holds no one accountable for them."

Yemeni activist **Aqamar Muhammad** commented on Saudi Arabia's repressive practices against opponents of its presence and policies in Al-Mahrah and its expansionist ambitions in Yemen: "Similar to the Emirati secret prisons in Aden and Hadramout, there are Saudi secret prisons in Al-Mahrah that disappear activists and journalists who expose Saudi expansionist policies in Al-Mahrah Governorate."

For his part, activist **Bandar Al-Bakari**, dismissed justifications and pretexts used by the Saudi and Emirati coalition to control Yemeni cities, islands, and regions. Their claims that they are aiding the Yemenis have become flimsy pretexts in Yemen.

"The Saudi military presence in Al-Mahra Governorate, the establishment of military bases and camps, and the conversion of Al-Ghaydah airport into a prison has no justification because Al-Mahra is located in the far east of Yemen and does not have any Houthi elements," said Al-Bakari.

Farouk, one of the demonstrators who had joined the popular protests against the Saudi presence in Al-Mahrah, was arrested in June 2019 as he was passing by the airport. He was detained at the airport prison and was interrogated by pro-Saudi Yemeni forces and then by a Saudi officer.

"I was interrogated in a room by a member of the Saudi military," Farouk said. "His military uniform and accent showed that he was Saudi. The officer himself told me that he was Saudi. He also told me that in the room there was a camera filming me and they could watch me live in Riyadh. He said that they knew who I was because they

filmed me in the demonstrations and recognized my face. They tried to force me to sign a pledge that I, and anyone from my family like my siblings, wouldn't participate in any anti-coalition activities. I refused to sign because, as I told them, our demonstrations were peaceful. The officer was verbally abusive. They took my phone at the gate so I couldn't call my family the entire time, for about two to three hours."⁵

Salem Al-Zubairi (27) gave shocking testimony about his two years in detention without charge. His only crime was his rejection of the UAE's policies. During his time in detention, he was transferred to several secret prisons run by the Emirates in southern Yemen, in the Balhaf oil facility, which is supervised by the French company Total, in southern Yemen.

He was subjected to the most heinous forms of torture and degrading treatment.

"They tortured me to confess to something I did not do," he said.

Al-Zubairi explained why he was detained: "At the beginning, during the interrogation by an Emirati officer, I was accused of communicating with foreign countries, but after a number of interrogation sessions, the same officer told me that the reason for my arrest was the rejection of the UAE's policies in Yemen."

² For more details, see the Human Rights Watch report on grave violations in Al-Mahra <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/25/yemen-saudi-forces-torture-disappear-yemenis>

In his testimony, which was published by Al-Jazeera Net and reported by many news channels and websites, Al-Zubairi describes the hell at the Emirati detention centers and the means of torture that were used on the detainees.

"During the first days of detention in the Belhaf facility prison, unimaginable forms of torture were practiced on us by Emirati soldiers led by an officer called Abu Saif Al-Emirati, and the torture continued during the period of detention and investigation in the facility for a period of three months," he recalled.

Regarding the methods of torture, Al-Zubairi said: **"These were very harsh days in detention, during which I was subjected to various types of torture, including electric shocks and beatings with sticks and electric wires until I passed out more than once.**

"They used psychological torture, including forced nudity, shackling, hanging by the hands and feet for hours, verbal abuse, severe beatings on the face, simulated drowning in a water basin, deprivation of sleep, and using the bathroom."⁶

⁶ Al-Zubairi is a resident of Shabwa Governorate, and he used to hold the position of head of the "oversight and inspection" body in the "Southern Revolutionary Movement" council, and he is also a member of the council's political bureau. For more details, see the report of the Yemeni organization Mwatana for Human Rights https://mwatana.org/en/in-the-darkness/#_ftn1

What Happens in those Detention Centers?

According to information gathered and verified by GIDHR, detainees in Saudi and UAE prisons face the most severe forms of oppression, humiliating and degrading treatment, and torture that no human mind can imagine.

The periods of detention for the detainees were a long journey of pain and psychological and physical suffering that no one could bear.

It starts from the moment of arrest and ends with dozens of them being thrown in front of hospitals barely clinging to life or with them being released without knowing what it is they did to have to endure all this psychological and physical violence that destroys the rest of their lives and turns into a tragedy for their families and those around them.

According to the information made available to GIDHR and according to the detainees' testimonies and the apparent marks on the bodies of the released, there were many methods of psychological and physical torture.

Our investigations identified the following methods:

- Kicking and slapping
- Deprivation of water and food for long periods
- Beating with whips, sticks, and electric wires
- Electrocutation
- Burning with cigarettes stubs
- Hanging upside down
- Shackling and hanging from the hands and feet for hours
- Hitting the extremities with hammers
- Sleep deprivation
- Denying access to toilets
- Use of insulting, "obscene and sexual" words
- Simulated drowning in water basins
- Forced to drink urine
- Forced nudity
- Prohibition from practicing rituals
- Prostrating to the Saudi and Emirati flags
- Sexual assault and rape
- Sodomy
- Threats of arrest and sexual assault of relatives

Former detainees confirmed that sexual violence was the main tool used by Emirati officers to punish detainees to extract "confessions". 2018 was a scandalous year for the UAE following revelations of the torture and rape of detainees taking place in its prisons.

The Associated Press published an investigation into brutal sexual assaults in prisons, with the support of the Americans. Various forms of abuse and brutal torture were practiced in these prisons, and the investigation revealed cases of torture in which prisoners were subjected to physical assaults and rape inside a UAE-run Yemeni prison.

“The systematic torture inside the prison was tied to a specific timetable, and these were weekly violations against the detainees, which included beatings on Saturdays, torture on Sundays, and a break on Mondays. On the other three days, the same thing is repeated. On Fridays, it was time for solitary confinement.”⁷

According to what the agency published, one of the Yemeni detainees who was jailed without charge was an artist who was able to detail the methods of torture and sexual assault he was subjected to.

His drawings were smuggled from the Bir Ahmed prison in the southern city of Aden, bringing with them a dark glimpse of a hidden world of blatant human rights violations committed by Emirati officers with no accountability or punishment.

Adel Al-Hasani, a political activist and one of the southern leaders, revealed information about the Emirati role in Aden and southern Yemen.

⁷ For more information, refer to the Associated Press investigations on the UAE prison scandals in Yemen https://apnews.com/amp/7994b4508e9c4a5eaf8a1cca9f20322f?_twitter_impression=true

He stated that all those in charge of the secret prisons are Emiratis and Colombians, and there are no Yemenis with them. Since he was a detainee in one of the Emirati-run prisons, his testimony included details about torture and the role of foreign mercenaries.

He indicated that they brought some prisoners who were bleeding into the cells and inserted iron tools in their bodies.

Al-Hasani added that the house of the security director of Aden was turned into a prison where innocent people were tortured and subjected to the most heinous crimes and violations without any trial and far from the eyes of the law.⁸

The Yemeni organization Mwatana for Human Rights revealed a number of incidents of torture in **Al-Rayyan Airport**⁹ detention center, which is controlled by the UAE forces.

It quoted former detainees as saying that "they were held in cramped and dark warehouses and were subjected to various forms of torture and ill-treatment, including deprivation of food and water, electric shocks, kicking and beatings with whips, and burning with cigarette stubs."

Others said, "They were subjected to humiliating forms of cruel treatment, such as depriving them of performing religious rituals, forced nudity, and prostrating to the UAE flag."¹⁰

⁸ For details, you can search for dozens of websites and news channels that published details about the testimony of former detainee in UAE prisons Adel Al-Hasani.

⁹ Hadramout, south of Yemen, Al-Rayyan International Airport is the third largest airport in Yemen after the airports of Sana'a in the capital and Aden. The airport is of great importance to citizens from an economic point of view.

¹⁰ In the Darkness is a report by the Yemeni Mwatana Organization on the facts of arbitrary detention and torture, May 2016 – April 2020 https://mwatana.org/en/in-the-darkness/#_ftn1

In January 2021, another report issued by the organization revealed information about the brutal treatment of detainees in UAE-run prisons and those operated by affiliated groups, including hanging them upside down for hours and sexual abuse.

According to the report, between January 2016 and April 2020, Mwatana investigated no less than 50 cases of arbitrary detention and 29 cases of torture, including 4 deaths, in Abyan prison.¹¹

In July 2020, Britain's Guardian newspaper revealed the extent of the violations that Yemenis were subjected to in detention centers and unofficial prisons, especially those run by armed groups backed by the UAE.

They were forced to drink urine and were subjected to beatings with hammers and sexual torture. According to eyewitnesses, "the bodies of some of the detainees from this prison were thrown in the yard of a hospital near the Husn Atiya prison, Khanfar district, in Abyan governorate, south of Yemen.

⁷ For more details and information, see link. https://mwatana.org/en/in-the-darkness/#_ftn1

Detainees & Victims Beyond the Boundaries of Humanity

Amjad began his painful conversation with GIDHR's Yemen researcher by talking about his detention in UAE-run prisons from September 14 to November 8, 2019.

"What the Emiratis are doing to the detainees is beyond the limits of humanity."

Amjad Al-Mansouri (36) is a resident of the city of Aden. He's a young man with a law degree and working in a commercial store in the city.

He recounts the details of his arrest, saying, "About nine o'clock, which was the time for my return home, I arrived at the street where I live, and before I approached the building where my apartment is located, I was surrounded by three civilians. One grabbed my hand and took me to their car. They took me away without any introductions other than 'You will come with us and we will return you to your home, do not be afraid.' From that point, I did not see my only child, my wife, and my family for more than 55 days."

The brother of Amjad's wife, Muhammad, describes the night of the arrest: "I was in the bookstore that I own that day. It was eleven o'clock in the evening when my sister, Amjad's wife, started calling me, worried about her husband as he had never been late without calling her.

"His phone was switched off after the last call she received from him, asking her what to bring for her and the child when he returned from the shop where he worked."

“We asked everyone we knew about Amjad, but we did not receive an answer. No one told us anything about him,” Muhammad explained.

Our search for him was continuous, and we helped Amjad's wife twice because she was overcome with grief over her husband, whose whereabouts she did not know and whether he was alive or dead.

Six days after Amjad's disappearance, his wife received a call from a person who told her, ‘Do not search for him and do not tire yourself. He is imprisoned by the Emiratis, and he will return home after they finish interrogating him.’”

55 Days of Torture & Oppression

Describing his tragic journey through the UAE-run detention centers, Amjad said: “That night, those who took me from the street took me to a security agency, which I later realized was the Mansoura police station. They placed me in the custody of the department.

“After midnight that day, I was transferred to a prison outside the city. I was surprised that those who received me were Emiratis, and they kept me in a room alone for three days during which no one spoke to me. I screamed a lot: What is my fault? What have I done? I ask you, by God, take me back to my home. I want to know what charge I was arrested for.

I was devastated on the fourth day when the door of the room was opened by two Emiratis wearing military uniforms. They slapped my face and kicked every part of my body. They continued slapping and kicking me until they brought me to a room at the end of a corridor connected to the room I was in.

“When I reached it, my nose and mouth were bleeding, and I only felt it when I heard the voice of a person standing in the middle of the room telling them, ‘Don't rush the son of a dog, leave him, and wait at the door.’ He began interrogating me, and it was the first time that someone spoke to me in three days.”

Demanding a better life is my only charge

Describing the hell he endured during his detention period, Amjad said: “The investigations carried on, and I was not charged with any specific crime. All I understood was that my arrest was a punishment for my participation in the Aden protests against the Emirati presence and its mismanagement of the city's affairs.

“I was part of the majority of those whose suffering increased after the UAE took control of Aden, and we hoped for a better life. They asked more than once about those young men who were with me and who financed us.

“I used to say that I didn't consider the demonstrations to be hatred towards the Emirates and that my participation was spontaneous. So, they'd beat me with a whip, and the marks are visible all over my body. They said the dirtiest words to me, and the interrogation sessions would end with me hanging and my hands and feet tied to a pole for a period that sometimes reached more than four or five hours or by making me clean the filth from the toilets and some of the detainees' cells.”

We will burn your daughter, your wife, and all your family

Amjad said: "One day I was taken to a separate room from the one where I was usually interrogated. There were two Emiratis, one of whom was in civilian clothes. He told me, 'You are the one who burned the Emirati flag during the demonstrations.' So, I swore to them that I did not burn the flag, and they started kicking me. They hit me on the face and one of them said to me literally, 'We will burn your wife, daughter, and all your family the same way you burned the flag.'

"After they had had enough of me, they brought the Emirati flag and placed it on my head. They told me that if it falls from my head, they will bring my daughter and burn her in front of me. I was in a lot of pain from the beating and punching, but I was afraid that the flag would fall off my head. I could not bear it for a long time, so I fell unconscious only to find myself in a solitary cell, where they put some food for me that even dogs do not eat."

I wished for death

Amjad concluded his testimony about what happened to him during his detention by saying he “lost hope of getting out of prison.”

“My pain increased whenever I thought that I would not see my daughter, my wife, and my family. I wished for death at every moment.”

“On the day of my release, I was blindfolded and taken out of prison. They put me in a car and I thought at the time that I would be transferred to another prison. But the car stopped, and I was dropped near the Caltex tour in the city of Aden after midnight.

“I realized at that time that I was released, and since that day my life became very bad and the pain of torment that I lived in the prison lives with me every moment. Even at the job that I and my family used to make a living from, the owner of the shop did not allow me to return fearing for himself.”

Enforced disappearance and transfer of detainees outside Yemen

Reports and information verified by GIDHR indicate that residents face many violations, starting with arbitrary arrests, detention in illegal places, and the torture of detainees, to the disappearance of many in places that are still unknown and the transfer of some detainees to detention centers inside Saudi Arabia illegally or to prisons run by the Saudi-Emirati coalition forces outside Yemen, especially the prisons identified in the Horn of Africa countries.¹²

According to the testimonies of officials, victims, and a number of their relatives, since the occupation of Al-Mahra, Saudi Arabia has carried out a number of arbitrary arrests and illegal transfers of Yemeni detainees to prisons in Saudi cities and forcibly disappeared dozens of people. At the time of writing this report, GIDHR verified that some families were still searching for their children without getting any information.

In October 2018, the UAE kidnapped a number of fishermen who were fishing in the territorial waters of the Republic of Yemen. They found themselves in UAE-run prisons, which are spread throughout neighboring African countries, such as Eritrea and Djibouti.

The UAE security forces that run these prisons subjected them to various types of torture. The signs of torture and visible marks on the bodies of those released were documented. Many of them recounted the humiliating and degrading treatment they received during their detention.

¹² International humanitarian law (the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 49) prohibits the transfer of detained civilians from their country to another country, such as what Saudi Arabia is doing towards the residents of Al-Mahra Governorate.

In April 2021, GIDHR documented the testimonies of witnesses and victims. GIDHR's Yemen researcher conducted interviews with three of the families who had moved from Al-Mahra to the capital, Sana'a. They lived in constant fear of persecution from the Saudi military and militia members affiliated with them. They were afraid of being accused of having positions against the Saudi presence in their city.¹³

Abdul Jalil (44) is a member of those families affected by the arbitrary arrest campaigns carried out by the Saudi forces. He reported that he was arrested twice over his participation in popular protests that took place in Al-Mahra Governorate to demand the departure of the Saudi forces from the city.

Abdul Jalil said, **"I was detained for the first time in September 2019 in Al-Ghayda airport prison for eight days, during which time I was held in one cell with 13 people, most of whom I knew."**

As is the case with all detainees in Saudi and Emirati prisons inside and outside Yemen, the charges they were arrested for included participation in popular protests against the Saudi and Emirati presence, disapproving the policies by which their cities are run, and allegations of relations with countries and groups hostile to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Abdul Jalil spoke about the charge he faced: **"I was interrogated about seven times by the Saudis, and they always told me, 'Why are you with those who are being paid to be against Saudi Arabia and want us to leave when we came to help you and protect you from the Houthis?'"**

¹³ International and local organizations, including Human Rights Watch, confirmed in previous reports that Saudi forces and their militias in Al-Mahrah used force, torture, and arbitrary detention to crush any opposition to their occupation, noting that Saudi Arabia currently has 20 bases and outposts in the governorate.

Abdul Jalil added, **"Who are they lying to? Al-Mahra was not a conflict zone, and there were no Houthi elements in it, as they claim."**

Less than a month after Abdul Jalil was released from Al-Ghaydah Airport prison, he was detained again. This time it was not like the previous one. He spent four months in detention, during which time he was transferred to three detention centers.

His longest stint was in the detention center in the Saudi city of Abha during which he was subjected to humiliating practices and various forms of psychological and physical torture.

Abdul Jalil said, **"After my release the first time, I had pledged not to engage in any activity against Saudi Arabia, but I continued to participate in all activities of the popular protest against Saudi Arabia, so I was arrested again less than a month after my previous arrest. But this time I was transferred to three prisons for four months and was brutally treated as if I were an aggressor and they were the owners of the land."**

From the Airport Prison in Al-Mahra to Saudi's Abha Prison

Abdul Jalil spoke about the Saudi forces transferring him to a prison outside Yemen: "Three days after my arrest, I was imprisoned outside Yemen. The pro-Saudi Yemeni security forces who arrested me handed me over to the Saudis at Al-Ghaydah Airport on the same day, where I was imprisoned for two days. Then, I was transferred with four others to a prison outside Yemen, which I later learned was a prison in Abha, Saudi Arabia, and I was imprisoned there for about four months."

Anwar (19), the only son of Abdul Jalil, spoke about his father's arrest: "When my father got out of the airport prison the first time, he was more opposed to the Saudi forces. He told us on the first day he was released, 'if we remain silent, a day will come and they will consider themselves the owners of the land and we are just their slaves.'"

He added, "When my father was arrested the second time, we thought they would release him within days like the previous time. When he did not show up, we searched and asked about him at the airport prison and they told us that they were not holding him. That is when we became fearful and anxious about his life, especially since we knew many who were detained and their fate remains unknown until today. Two months later, we received a call from a Saudi person telling us that my father was in Abha prison in Saudi Arabia."

Abdul Jalil concluded his testimony to GIDHR with sadness: "They released me and informed me clearly 'if you do anything against us, we will not arrest you alone this time.' I could no longer bear it anymore, and I was very afraid of the persecution that my family and relatives

would be subjected to. I did not fear for myself for a moment. I am very sad because I was unable to continue doing my duty to oppose the Saudi presence and their oppression of the residents of my city, Al-Mahra.”

Kidnapping on the Road

Investigations conducted by GIDHR into Yemeni detainees in Saudi and Emirati prisons uncovered another type of prisoner. In addition to the detainees from cities and areas in which Saudi and Emirati forces are deployed, we documented cases involving dozens of civilians from the cities and regions of Yemen outside their control who were kidnapped while on the roads or were detained at pro-Saudi Yemeni security checkpoints. They were thrown into the prisons of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates inside Yemen and outside its borders.

GIDHR documented a number of violations committed by the Saudi-Emirati coalition forces and their affiliated armed groups against travelers to and from the cities and areas they manage and control.

GIDHR has verified that kidnappings and arbitrary arrests along the roads affected dozens of travelers, especially those arriving or leaving from the governorates of Aden and Marib.

Some of them are still forcibly disappeared. Others were released after spending a certain period of time in UAE and Saudi prisons and enduring psychological and physical torture.

Dr. Mustafa Al-Mutawakel, who has been forcibly disappeared since April 27, 2017, was detained on his way back from Seiyun to Sana'a after taking part in an international science conference in Morocco. He was taken to an unknown location, and no one was able to visit him or contact him.

Elham Al-Mutawakel, Dr. Mustafa's wife, had gone to Marib to inquire about him and found nothing but bad and humiliating treatment. No one told her about her husband's whereabouts

Before leaving Marib, losing hope after two weeks of searching, she said, **"I received a phone call from an unknown phone number. The caller told me that Dr. Mustafa is no longer in Marib and that he has been handed over to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."**

Women were also subject to arbitrary arrest, kidnapping along the roads, and transferred to Saudi prisons. One of them was a Yemeni lady, **Samira Marsh**, who was arbitrarily detained in Al-Jawf and transferred to a detention center in the city of Marib before being handed over to the Saudi authorities. She is still detained and all efforts to secure her release have been rejected so far.

Torturing those kidnapped along the Roads

Judge Hussein al-Dailami, one of the detainees in the Marib prisons, was detained on his way back from Makkah.

"Since my arrest, I have been treated as a war criminal. I have been subjected to insults, intimidation, psychological torture, and was threatened with being handed over to al-Qaeda and ISIS to be slaughtered. They even denied me access to reading glasses for three months and prevented me from treatment for a certain period of time."

Describing the treatment of detainees, Al-Dailami said: **"Among the tragedies that I used to see and hear are the torture, wounds, and beatings. They beat the abductees with thick electric wires called cables on the face, nose, penis, buttocks, and legs. They even broke the metatarsal of one person's foot and beat his leg until they broke it. They used to hang some people until their shoulders were dislocated. They hung two water bottles from the testicles of one person for three hours. They hung others for three days and prevented them from praying."**

At the time of writing this report, the danger of kidnapping and imprisonment still faces those coming from the Yemeni governorates outside the control of the Saudi-Emirati coalition forces, especially those traveling outside Yemen through the land and airports controlled by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

These are the remaining outlets for Yemenis following the closure of all other ports, especially Sana'a International Airport, which served as the main artery for the movement of millions of Yemenis traveling abroad every year.

Dozens of innocent activists, students studying abroad, academics, university professors, and journalists who have been kidnapped remain in prisons, and their families are still unable to reach them, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE refuse to release them so far.

Conclusion

The Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human Rights hopes to draw, through the information contained in this report, a picture of a dangerous and painful reality that hundreds of people are still facing in dozens of prisons and detention centers run by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen and abroad. This is a violation of international humanitarian law that requires the prosecution of the perpetrators of these violations and those responsible for it, whether military or civilians.

GIDHR calls on the international community to carry out its duties to limit these grave breaches of international humanitarian law, to ensure the start of serious investigations for this type of war crime, and to conduct procedures for holding the perpetrators accountable and redressing and compensating the victims.

GIDHR also calls on the Saudi and Emirati authorities to release all Yemeni detainees in their prisons and for their military forces to leave Yemeni cities, islands, and areas whose residents are subjected to the worst practices of repression and the confiscation of public rights and freedoms under what can be considered a direct occupation.

Sources and references

- Investigations conducted by the Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human Rights during the period April-July 2021, including statements and testimonies provided by former detainees and a number of their family members

- Information provided by investigations and reports issued by international non-governmental organizations, local non-governmental organizations, and a number of international websites and newspapers:

- [Human Rights Watch](#)
- The local Yemeni organization [Mwatana for Human Rights](#)
- [The Associated Press](#)
- Le Monde
- The Guardian

YEMEN

PRISONS BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF HUMANITY

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