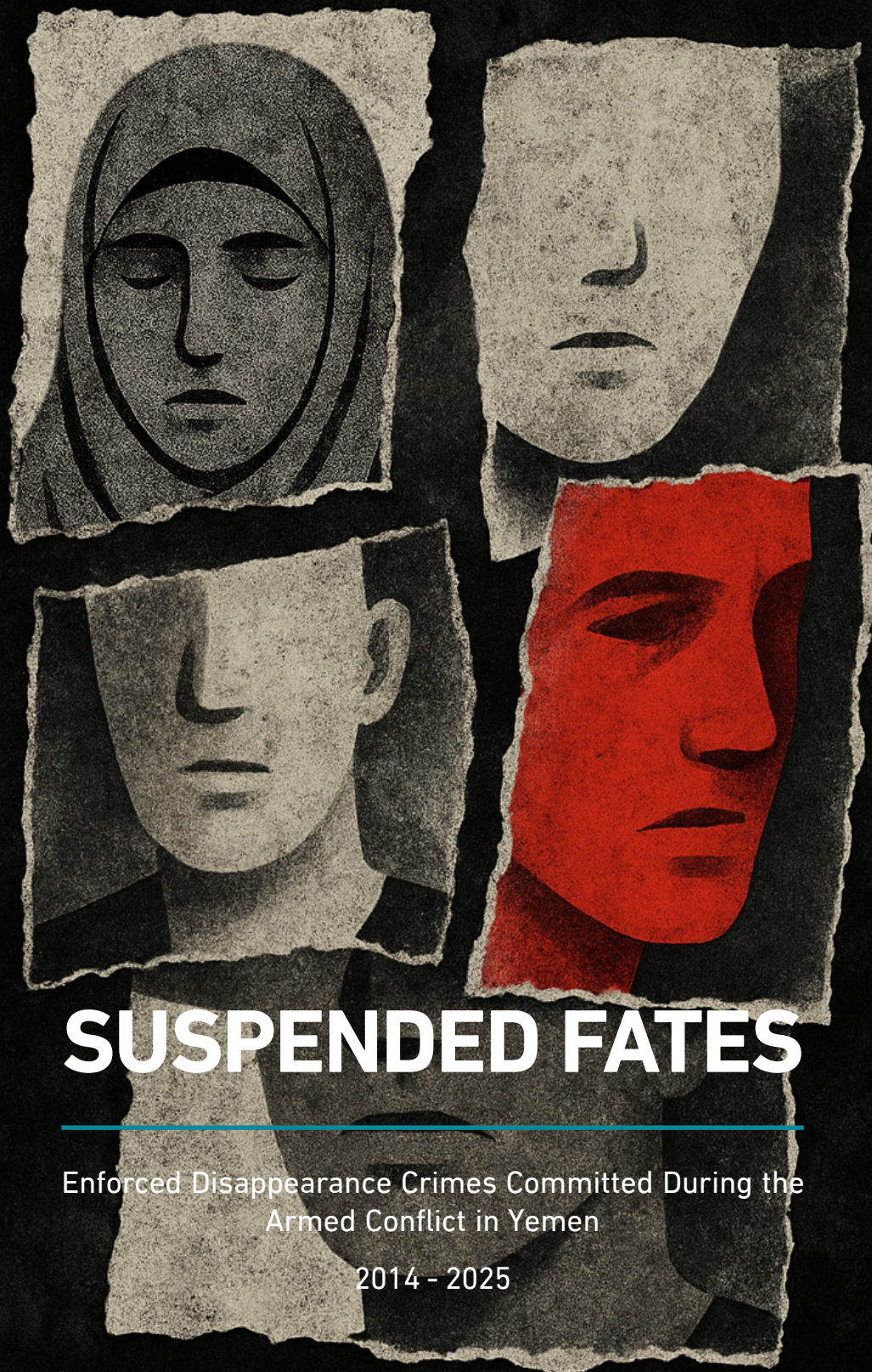




SUSPENDED FATES

Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed During the
Armed Conflict in Yemen

2014 - 2025



Mwatana
for Human Rights

August 2025

Table of Content

Executive Summary	8
Recommendations	11
To the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group:	12
To the internationally recognized government and formations affiliated with the Islah Party:	13
To the Southern Transitional Council:	14
To national and international human rights civil society:	14
To the United Nations and the international community:	15
Introduction	17
Methodology	19
Chapter One	21
General Background	22
Historical Context of Enforced Disappearance in Yemen	22
Cycles of Power Struggles in Yemen	22
The Central Region Wars	22
January 1986 Events	22
Unification	23
The Civil War (1994)	23
The Six Saada Wars	23
A Heavy Legacy of Crimes	24
The File of Enforced Disappearance in Yemen before the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances	24
Enforced Disappearance in Yemen in the Context of the Ongoing Conflict	28
The 2011 Protests	28
Violations	28
The Fall of Sana'a	29
The Saudi/UAE-Led Coalition	29
Yemeni Parties to Conflict	29
Chapter Two	32
Legal Framework	33
Definition of Enforced Disappearance and Its Distinction from Other Forms of Deprivation of Liberty	33

Criteria for Distinguishing Between Arbitrary Detention and Enforced Disappearance	34
Legal Basis	34
Official Notification	34
Record-Keeping	34
Contact with the Outside World	34
Right to Appear Before a Court	34
Prohibition of Enforced Disappearance under International Human Rights Law	35
The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.	36
Key Features of the Convention:	36
Core Obligations on States Parties under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance:	38
Enforced Disappearance under the Four Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols	39
Enforced Disappearance in Customary International Humanitarian Law.	41
Enforced Disappearance under the Rome Statute.	43
Enforced Disappearance in National Legislation	45
Remains of Victims of Enforced Disappearance and Mass Graves in International Law . . .	47
Chapter Three	49
Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Yemen	50
Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) Group	50
Enforced Disappearance as a Tool to Target Humanitarian Workers	62
Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Southern Transitional Council Forces	63
Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Forces of the Internationally Recognized Government	70
Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Saudi/UAE-led Coalition Forces	81
Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	84
Chapter Four	91
Mwatana for Human Rights' Efforts in Addressing Enforced Disappearance Crimes in Yemen	92

Documentation	92
Providing Legal Support	92
Advocacy and Pressure	92
Chapter Five	95
International Mechanisms for the Protection of Persons from Enforced Disappearance.	96
The United Nations	96
The Role of the UN Security Council in Protecting Victims of Enforced Disappearance	96
The Role of the Security Council in Cases of Enforced Disappearance in Yemen	97
The Role of the United Nations General Assembly in Protecting Persons from Enforced Disappearance.	100
The Role of the Human Rights Council in Protecting Persons from Enforced Disappearance.	100
Special Procedures Related to Enforced Disappearance	101
The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances	101
Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence	102
Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Mechanism	102
Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen (GEE)	104
Committee on Enforced Disappearances	105
International Fact-Finding Commission	106
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	107
Recommendations	110
To the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group:	111
To the internationally recognized government and formations affiliated with the Islah Party:	111
To the Southern Transitional Council:	113
To national and international human rights civil society:	114
To the United Nations and the international community:	114

Executive Summary

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Yemen, now nearing the end of its eleventh year, all parties to the conflict have committed a wide range of human rights violations, including crimes of enforced disappearance. Hundreds of victims remain hidden away in detention facilities run by all sides, deprived of their most basic rights, while hundreds of families remain trapped in an exhausting state of waiting—oscillating between unanswered pleas for help and repeated official denials. This pattern of enforced disappearance has inflicted severe social, psychological, and economic harm.

The report *Suspended Fates* presents the findings of in-depth field research conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights between September 2014 and July 2025, during which more than 2,068 interviews were conducted with victims' families. The organization documented at least 1,592 incidents of enforced disappearance involving 2,120 victims. The Ansar Allah (Houthi) group was found responsible for 756 incidents involving 897 victims. Forces of the internationally recognized government were responsible for 351 incidents involving 449 victims. The Saudi/UAE-led coalition was responsible for 65 incidents involving 91 victims. Forces of the Southern Transitional Council were responsible for 387 incidents involving 630 victims. The Joint Forces were responsible for 15 incidents involving 21 victims. Eritrean forces were responsible for 5 incidents involving 19 victims. Terrorist organizations were responsible for 13 incidents involving 13 victims of enforced disappearance.

The report consists of five main chapters, in addition to the executive summary and recommendations addressed to the various parties to the conflict in Yemen, civil society, the United Nations, and the international community, based on the issues covered.

The first chapter examines aspects of the historical context of enforced disappearance crimes accompanying cycles of political conflict in both parts of Yemen, including the central region wars, the January 1986 events in Aden, the 1994 summer war in the south, the six Saada wars, the “war on terror” campaign following the events of September 11, 2001, the issue of enforced disappearance within international mechanisms, the 2011 uprisings, and finally the crimes of enforced disappearance committed during the armed conflict that erupted in late 2014—where enforced disappearance has been systematically used as a tool for repression and intimidation.

The second chapter addresses the legal framework governing the crime of enforced disappearance and the relevant international obligations under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, and the Rome Statute. It also explains how Yemeni national legislation prohibits enforced disappearance, with particular attention to provisions relating to the remains of enforced disappearance victims and mass graves.

The report demonstrates how enforced disappearance evolved from a tool targeting activists and dissidents into a widespread crime affecting a broad range of individuals: journalists, civil servants, humanitarian workers, human rights defenders, and even ordinary civilians stopped at checkpoints. Since the establishment of frontlines in 2015, the rate of enforced disappearances has surged in major cities such as Sana'a, Aden, and Al Hudaydah, as well as in other governorates—surpassing political or regional affiliations to include arbitrary suspicion based on surnames, places of residence, or travel routes.

The third chapter presents case studies of enforced disappearance crimes committed by various parties involved in such violations since the outbreak of the conflict in late 2014, including the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, the Southern Transitional Council, forces of the internationally recognized government (including formations affiliated with the Islah Party), the Saudi/UAE-led coalition, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. These are organized geographically and chronologically, highlighting prominent cases where the fate of victims remains unknown as of the drafting of this report.

The report, in its fourth chapter, presents an aspect of Mwatana for Human Rights' efforts in addressing the crime of enforced disappearance, such as documentation and providing legal support to victims and their families through a network of female and male lawyers. These efforts culminated in revealing the fate of dozens of forcibly disappeared individuals and removing them from the circle of enforced disappearance, or securing their release from secret detention facilities, in addition to advocacy and lobbying campaigns.

The fifth chapter reviews international protection mechanisms, starting with United Nations bodies (the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, the Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review, and the Group of Eminent Experts), followed by the role of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, the International Fact-Finding Commission, and the International Committee of the Red Cross in monitoring violations and ensuring the safe return of those forcibly disappeared.

Recommendations

To the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group:

1. Adhere to the principles and rules of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and applicable national legislation, including international conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants, and all treaties that Yemen has committed to uphold under Article (6) of the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen.
2. Immediately cease committing crimes of enforced disappearance.
3. Disclose the fate of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, release them, provide redress to the victims, and ensure accountability for those responsible for such violations.
4. Initiate prompt and transparent investigations into crimes of enforced disappearance and their surrounding circumstances, and hold those responsible to account.
5. Take effective steps to provide reparations to victims of enforced disappearance and their families and to ensure their redress.
6. Establish a register of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, including victims' names, the dates and places of their detention, and the measures taken in their regard.
7. Cooperate with relevant United Nations mechanisms, in particular the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and facilitate their access to information, victims' testimonies, and detention facilities.
8. Work to reform security agencies and activate the roles of both the Public Prosecution and the Inspector General, ensuring compliance with legal procedures relating to arrest, detention, pretrial detention, and other judicial processes.
9. Close all unofficial detention facilities, place official detention facilities under monitoring, and enable humanitarian organizations and international agencies to have safe access to them.
10. Provide conditions of detention that meet international standards for places of detention, ensuring detainees remain in a safe and healthy environment.

To the internationally recognized government and formations affiliated with the Islah Party:

1. Adhere to the principles and rules of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and applicable national legislation, including international conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants, and all treaties that Yemen has committed to uphold under Article (6) of the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen.
2. Immediately cease committing crimes of enforced disappearance.
3. Disclose the fate of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, release them, provide redress to the victims, and ensure accountability for those responsible for such violations.
4. Open secure channels of communication with the families of the forcibly disappeared, especially victims of previous cycles of conflict, to inform them of any immediate developments concerning their relatives.
5. Initiate prompt and transparent investigations into crimes of enforced disappearance and their surrounding circumstances, and hold those responsible to account.
6. Take effective steps to provide reparations to victims of enforced disappearance and their families and to ensure their redress.
7. Ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.
8. Establish a national register of the forcibly disappeared and create a database containing victims' details and the circumstances of their disappearance.
9. Cooperate with United Nations mechanisms, including the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and UN Special Rapporteurs.
10. Work to reform security agencies and activate the roles of both the Public Prosecution and the Inspector General, ensuring compliance with legal procedures relating to arrest, detention, pretrial detention, and other judicial processes.
11. Close all unofficial detention facilities, place official detention facilities under monitoring, and enable humanitarian organizations and international agencies to have safe access to them.
12. Provide conditions of detention that meet international standards for places of detention, ensuring detainees remain in a safe and healthy environment.

To the Southern Transitional Council:

1. Adhere to the principles and rules of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and applicable national legislation, including international conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants, and all treaties that Yemen has committed to uphold under Article (6) of the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen.
2. Immediately cease committing crimes of enforced disappearance.
3. Disclose the fate of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, release them, provide redress to the victims, and ensure accountability for those responsible for such violations.
4. Initiate prompt and transparent investigations into crimes of enforced disappearance and their surrounding circumstances, and hold those responsible to account.
5. Take effective steps to provide reparations to victims of enforced disappearance and their families and to ensure their redress.
6. Establish a register of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, including victims' names, the dates and places of their detention, and the measures taken in their regard.
7. Cooperate with relevant United Nations mechanisms, in particular the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and facilitate their access to information, victims' testimonies, and detention facilities.
8. Work to reform security forces and formations, and activate the roles of both the Public Prosecution and the Inspector General, ensuring compliance with legal procedures relating to arrest, detention, pretrial detention, and other judicial processes.
9. Close all unofficial detention facilities, place official detention facilities under monitoring, and enable humanitarian organizations and international agencies to have safe access to them.
10. Provide conditions of detention that meet international standards for places of detention, ensuring detainees remain in a safe and healthy environment.

To national and international human rights civil society:

1. Strengthen efforts to monitor and document crimes of enforced disappearance and the various violations suffered by victims and their families.

Suspended Fates

2. Raise awareness within communities and among the parties to the conflict about the risks and impacts of enforced disappearance.
3. Examine and study the causes and consequences of enforced disappearance and identify means of addressing them based on sound scientific and methodological approaches.
4. Enhance advocacy and pressure efforts aimed at securing the release of victims of enforced disappearance.
5. Facilitate meetings between the families of the forcibly disappeared in Yemen, and support alliance-building efforts to coordinate the exchange of information and advocacy strategies among organizations concerned with the forcibly disappeared in Yemen.
6. Advocate for the presumption of life for victims of enforced disappearance to facilitate search efforts, regardless of the circumstances or timing of the disappearance.
7. Utilize available channels of communication through international mechanisms to establish a register of enforced disappearance cases.

To the United Nations and the international community:

1. Support peace efforts that can help end the conflict and the violations associated with it, foremost among them enforced disappearance.
2. Initiate transparent and independent investigations to identify the different parties involved in committing enforced disappearance crimes in Yemen, and take effective steps to end the culture of impunity.
3. Press for Yemen's ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and other relevant treaties.
4. Pressure the parties to the conflict to disclose the fate of the forcibly disappeared, release those arbitrarily detained, end torture and other forms of ill-treatment, and cease all human rights violations.
5. The Security Council should refer the situation in Yemen to the International Criminal Court.
6. Integrate enforced disappearance into the transitional justice process, ensuring that any political settlement or peace negotiation includes a clear mechanism for addressing enforced disappearance: truth-seeking, accountability, reparations, and social reintegration.

Suspended Fates

7. Work to establish a judicial mechanism with jurisdiction over enforced disappearance cases across the various cycles of political conflict in Yemen, tasked with receiving complaints, reviewing records, hearing testimonies, conducting investigations, determining victims' fates, providing reparations, ensuring compensation, pursuing accountability, and facilitating commemoration.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, over the course of five decades, Yemen's cycles of political conflict—struggles for power, coups, wars, and authoritarian regimes—have accumulated a heavy burden of grievances resulting from the abuse of power and the absence of the rule of law. At the forefront of these grievances are the cases of victims of enforced disappearance. Successive authorities in Yemen have squandered numerous opportunities to address these cases systematically, to ensure justice for the victims, and to guarantee non-recurrence—whether at the conclusion of conflict cycles, during periods of relative stability, or at pivotal moments of historical transition. Consequently, these cases have remained as open wounds, with their humanitarian, social, economic, and political consequences deepening over time, weighing heavily on Yemen's path forward.

The armed conflict that erupted in late 2014 further multiplied Yemen's burden of grievances. The incidence of enforced disappearances increased sharply, becoming a systematic pattern practiced by various parties to the conflict. Thousands of civilians were targeted, including activists, journalists, lawyers, academics, political opponents, and even ordinary citizens who were arbitrarily arrested and then forcibly disappeared for prolonged periods—without notifying their families, bringing them before a court, or disclosing their fate.

Experience has shown that the consequences of enforced disappearance extend far beyond the direct victim, impacting the psychological, economic, and social well-being of their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. These repercussions ripple outward, affecting entire communities that live under constant fear of meeting the same fate.

Given the severity and gravity of enforced disappearance and its far-reaching effects, protecting individuals and communities from this crime is a collective responsibility. Immediate cessation of all enforced disappearance practices is essential, as is the establishment of an independent national mechanism mandated to uncover the truth, determine the fate and whereabouts of all disappeared persons, ensure the release of those unlawfully detained, and secure for victims and their families the rights to justice, redress, reparation, accountability, and guarantees of non-recurrence—not only as rights of the direct and indirect victims of enforced disappearance, but also as fundamental requirements for any genuine and comprehensive peace process in Yemen.

Methodology

The findings of this report are based on field research and investigative inquiries into enforced disappearance crimes committed against civilians under the control of various parties to the conflict in Yemen since the outbreak of hostilities in September 2014. Mwatana for Human Rights conducted approximately 2,068 interviews with families and relatives of forcibly disappeared persons. The preparation of this report began with the documentation of enforced disappearance cases perpetrated by different conflict parties, through field visits by lawyers from Mwatana's Legal Support Unit, who listened to the accounts of victims' relatives and conducted in-depth interviews with them.

The Legal Support Unit also received ongoing reports from victims' families and eyewitnesses, recorded their testimonies, verified their accuracy, gathered the necessary evidence and documents, and updated its database throughout the period of providing legal support.

This report includes only those cases verified by Mwatana through direct interviews or telephone conversations with victims, their families, or eyewitnesses, and does not claim to provide comprehensive statistical coverage of all enforced disappearance cases.

All interviews were conducted individually and in Arabic, with informed consent obtained from each respondent after explaining how the provided information and testimonies would be used.

In many documented cases, Mwatana was able to provide legal assistance to forcibly disappeared persons, resulting in the clarification of the fate of some victims—changing their status from “forcibly disappeared” to “detained”—or securing their release.

The report also presents cases of victims who remain in enforced disappearance at the time of publication, while legal support continues to be provided to many of them, excluding those whose release was successfully secured by Mwatana's legal team.

To protect the privacy of certain victims of enforced disappearance, the report uses pseudonyms in place of real names in some cases, in order to safeguard their families from potential risks.

Chapter One

General Background

Historical Context of Enforced Disappearance in Yemen

Since the September 26, 1962 Revolution, which overthrew the monarchy and declared the establishment of the Arab Republic of Yemen in the north of the country, and the October 14, 1963 Revolution that culminated in the declaration of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen on November 30, 1967 in the south, Yemen in both its parts witnessed a series of political conflict cycles. In these conflicts, all parties resorted to tools of repression and intimidation as a means to subdue opponents and silence dissenting voices. Enforced disappearance emerged as one of the tools employed during these struggles, aiming to instill fear and intimidation among the opposition and segments of society that might support or sympathize with political opponents.

Cycles of Power Struggles in Yemen

Both parts of Yemen experienced multiple rounds of power struggles and coups, accompanied by arrest campaigns targeting hundreds of political opponents from various affiliations. Those arrested were held in secret locations, beyond any legal oversight, and were denied communication with their families or access to lawyers. In many cases, no formal charges were brought against them, leading to their enforced disappearance for long periods under complete secrecy, with their families having no knowledge of their fate or conditions of detention. Some were eventually released, while others remain disappeared to this day.

The Central Region Wars

In Yemen's central regions, bloody confrontations broke out between the government forces of the Arab Republic of Yemen (former North Yemen)—specifically army and security units, with participation from the Muslim Brotherhood allied with then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime during the 1970s and 1980s—and the National Democratic Front supported by the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) in the south. This took place in the context of what became known as the "Central Region War" or "The Front War" (1979–1982), leaving behind a heavy record of violations, including the enforced disappearance of dozens of fighters and civilians whose families remained unaware of their fate for many years.

January 1986 Events

On January 13, 1986, a bloody civil conflict erupted in Aden between factions of the ruling Yemeni Socialist Party in South Yemen. The conflict resulted in hundreds of military and

civilian casualties. Enforced disappearance was widely used by the warring factions to eliminate their political rivals within the same party. Dozens, even hundreds, of individuals were forcibly disappeared, including members of the Socialist Party itself, as well as political activists from various backgrounds.

Unification

On May 22, 1990, the unification of Yemen between the north and south was declared. Although this announcement represented a historic opportunity to address the issue of enforced disappearance in both parts of the country, the authorities limited their actions to issuing death certificates for some victims in the south, while the fate of victims from both north and south remained shrouded in mystery.

The Civil War (1994)

With the outbreak of the 1994 summer war, Yemen witnessed a new wave of enforced disappearances targeting opponents. The new authorities in Sana'a used this crime systematically to suppress any opposition to their control. Despite the Yemeni government's denial of any enforced disappearance incidents during the 1994 war, dozens of documented cases from that period clearly contradict such claims.

The Six Saada Wars

In 2004, the first round of the six Saada wars erupted between the Yemeni government and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group. Initially a limited confrontation, the conflict quickly escalated into a prolonged and violent war. These wars were marked by repeated cycles of fighting between government forces and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, accompanied by a consistent pattern of serious human rights violations, including enforced disappearance.

A 2008 Human Rights Watch report, titled *Disappearances and Arbitrary Arrests in the Context of Armed Conflict with Houthi Rebels in Yemen*, documented hundreds of cases of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance carried out by Yemeni authorities against civilians in conflict areas—particularly those suspected of sympathizing with the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group or having family ties to security suspects. Victims were held in secret locations under harsh conditions, including torture, ill-treatment, and complete absence of judicial oversight¹.

1 Human Rights Watch, "Disappearances and Arbitrary Arrests in the Armed Conflict with Huthi Rebels in Yemen", <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/10/24/disappearances-and-arbitrary-arrests-armed-conflict-huthi-rebels-yemen>.

These violations included abducting individuals from streets or homes without judicial warrants and holding them in Political Security Organization facilities or unofficial prisons where no visits or outside contact were allowed. Authorities often denied holding them, placing them in the category of the “forcibly disappeared” for extended periods, with families receiving no information about their fate or whereabouts.

A Heavy Legacy of Crimes

Over nearly five decades of Yemeni history, cycles of political conflict have accumulated a heavy legacy of victims of enforced disappearance. Numerous opportunities to address cases of enforced disappearance were squandered—whether after the end of conflict cycles, during periods of relative stability, or at historic junctures such as the declaration of unity between the two regions. The successive Yemeni governments’ neglect of these cases and their refusal to establish effective mechanisms for truth-seeking, fate determination, and reparations have compounded the complexity of the issue, leaving thousands of families in ongoing suffering, searching for the slightest trace of their forcibly disappeared loved ones.

The File of Enforced Disappearance in Yemen before the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

In 1997, during the fifty-second session of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, representatives of the Yemeni government expressed their willingness and readiness to fully cooperate with this UN body. This official initiative was conveyed in a note verbale dated 16 October 1997, in which the Yemeni government extended a formal invitation to the Working Group to visit Yemen—a precedent-setting move intended to demonstrate the State’s commitment to cooperating with international human rights mechanisms.

In response to this invitation, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) dispatched an international mission to Yemen in 1998, upon the formal request of the Yemeni government. The main objective was to investigate cases of enforced disappearance, particularly those related to the events of January 1986, which took place within the context of a bloody political conflict in the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. The Working Group’s visit took place from 17 to 21 August 1998, bringing with it an initial list of 150 cases of enforced disappearance, focusing on victims of the internal split within the Yemeni Socialist Party at the time.

As a preliminary step before the UN delegation’s arrival, the Yemeni government had already referred 102 cases of enforced or involuntary disappearance to the Working Group—

an indication of an official, albeit procedurally limited, willingness to cooperate.

Although the original invitation had focused on reviewing enforced disappearances that occurred during the January 1986 civil war, the Working Group, in accordance with its mandate, decided to consider any additional information or cases regardless of the time period or geographical scope, thereby expanding the investigation to include multiple cases beyond that particular conflict.

During official meetings with government officials, the Yemeni authorities informed the Working Group that the current state could not be held legally responsible for acts committed before Yemeni unification in 1990, arguing that crimes perpetrated by the government of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen did not fall under the responsibilities of the Unified-Yemen government.

All officials met by the Working Group acknowledged that enforced disappearances had occurred during and after the 1986 civil war. However, they described these cases as politically sensitive matters that had been resolved through political settlement in the context of the unification agreement. According to their statements, the negotiations that led to unification included an implicit agreement between the faction representing the Arab Republic of Yemen in the north and the faction in the south responsible for those violations, under which full amnesty was granted to all perpetrators of the 1986 violations, who were then integrated into the structure of the new state.

On 22 December 1998, the OHCHR, in cooperation with the experts of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, published a detailed report on the findings of the UN mission. The report documented cases of enforced disappearance in which victims had been arbitrarily arrested by Yemeni security forces without adherence to basic legal safeguards. It noted that the Yemeni government had acknowledged the fate of some cases, but left dozens of others unresolved, perpetuating uncertainty over the victims' fate².

In 2005, correspondence resumed between the Yemeni government and the OHCHR, in which the Yemeni authorities were requested to provide copies of death certificates for the victims in order to close the remaining cases. However, a lack of transparency and continued ambiguity prevented a final resolution. The report stated that the Yemeni government had declared the missing persons legally dead, while also acknowledging that Yemen's civil registry system was significantly underdeveloped compared to advanced countries, lacking

2 United Nations (1998, December 22), Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances: mission to Yemen (E/CN.4/1999/62/Add.1). United Nations. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g98/052/80/pdf/g9805280.pdf>.

clear legislation to determine the civil status of a missing person.

Under Articles (113 to 120) of Republican Decree No. 20 of 1992 on Personal Status³, a court may declare a missing person dead after two years if the disappearance occurred under exceptional circumstances, or after four years if it occurred under normal conditions—provisions that allow for wide interpretive discretion regarding the legal status of the disappeared⁴.

The Yemeni authorities further stated that prisons and detention facilities in the southern governorates had been under the control of officials of the former southern regime until the outbreak of the 1994 civil war, which ended with government forces taking control of those areas. They noted that when government forces entered those prisons, no detainees connected to the 1986 events were found, and no evidence was uncovered to determine the fate of the missing persons, claiming that investigations had yielded no concrete results⁵.

The authorities reported that in 1995 and 1996 they discovered containers holding decomposed bodies believed to belong to individuals executed during the 1986 civil war. Witnesses from nearby areas confirmed they were aware of the existence of these containers but refrained from reporting them out of fear of retaliation.

Regarding the accountability of those responsible for the crimes committed in 1986, the government explained that most of them had gone into exile—in countries such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom—after losing the 1994 civil war, which followed their declaration of the south's independence. It noted that some were tried in absentia on charges related to an attempted coup, but those charges did not specifically include the crimes committed in 1986⁶.

The UN report concluded that during its visit, the Working Group obtained a clear understanding of the complex political and military context in which the cases of enforced disappearance had occurred. It explained that these cases were the result of a bloody power struggle between factions of the Yemeni Socialist Party, and that the unification of Yemen in 1990 had led to a political settlement of those disputes. Nevertheless, the Group surmised that the disappeared persons were likely executed immediately after their arrest. The UN delegation also observed a lack of societal and official interest in pursuing the matter or

3 Articles (113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120) of the Personal Status Law.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

demanding broader investigations⁷.

The Group expressed deep concern over the Yemeni government's failure to conduct adequate legal investigations and its failure to provide individual responses to the cases referred to it, instead offering only general explanations of the political context surrounding the enforced disappearances. No efforts were made to locate mass graves or conduct forensic examinations to determine the identities of the discovered bodies, leaving the matter unresolved.

The delegation also voiced fears over the persistence of a culture of impunity, particularly with regard to security forces, and the existence of secret detention facilities where individuals are held in complete isolation for extended periods without judicial or legal oversight⁸.

On 21 February 2005, Minister of Human Rights Amat Al Alim Alsoswa sent an official letter to Minister of Defense Major General Abdullah Ali Aliwah, requesting copies of the death certificates of the forcibly disappeared, after the Ministry of Defense confirmed that some of them were still receiving salaries and pensions—raising legal questions about their civil status⁹.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Yemeni government to respond to 94 cases out of the 150 cases listed in the initial roster, after only 56 cases had been closed. In response, the Ministry of Human Rights formed a national investigative team, which conducted multiple field visits and met with a number of victims' families, who rejected any settlements that did not reveal the fate of their loved ones.

Mohammed Ahmed Saeed Al-Tawil, head of the national team, stated that more than 80% of the cases were linked to the events of 1986, amounting to 138 cases in the south and 12 in the north. The investigations also uncovered cases not included in the OHCHR's list, including victims of the Nasserist October 1978 movement and victims of the 1994 war, confirming that the actual number of enforced disappearance cases exceeds the documented figures¹⁰.

Separately, the National Supreme Committee for Human Rights was established in 1998 and opened channels of communication with the families of the disappeared, but it did not complete its mandate as required. A high-level government team was also formed in 2001,

7 Ibid.

8 United Nations. Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances: Visit to Yemen (17–21 August 1998). UN Doc. E/CN.4/1999/62/Add.1. New York: United Nations, 1998, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g98/052/80/pdf/g9805280.pdf>.

9 A printed copy obtained by Mwatana of the official letter addressed on February 12, 2005.

10 Alwahdawi Net. (2006, November 26). The United Nations calls on Yemen to disclose 94 cases of enforced disappearance https://alwahdawi.net/en/news-2077?utm_source.

which visited families of the forcibly disappeared, and coordination between the Committee and the Ministry continued until 2006, during which the UN Working Group was provided with information on 57 cases in 2002, nine additional cases in 2004, and later on 88 out of 90 cases, with 12 cases remaining under investigation.

In 2007, during the discussion of Yemen's periodic report before the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva, the government announced that persons forcibly disappeared under mysterious circumstances were considered martyrs after an extended absence, and that their families had been financially compensated, while the Ministry of Human Rights continued to receive reports.

Overall, the crime of enforced disappearance in Yemen prior to 2011 represents one of the most complex human rights files and reflects the bloody political conflicts the country has witnessed. Thousands of Yemenis disappeared under mysterious circumstances as part of political purges and the consolidation of dominance, and many Yemeni families are still awaiting truth and justice in a case that remains unresolved despite the passing of decades since its inception.

Enforced Disappearance in Yemen in the Context of the Ongoing Conflict

The 2011 Protests

At the beginning of 2011, popular protests erupted in Yemen against the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled the country for more than three decades. Demonstrators called for an end to authoritarianism and corruption, and for paving the way toward a democratic civil state. Although these protests—part of what became known as the Arab Spring uprisings—began peacefully, they quickly evolved into a complex political struggle marked by armed clashes, tribal and security interventions, and the involvement of multiple political actors.

Violations

On 23 November 2011, Yemeni political parties signed the Gulf Initiative, a political agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council and supported by the United Nations. The accord stipulated the transfer of power from President Saleh to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, in exchange for granting Saleh immunity from prosecution. It was accompanied by a detailed roadmap that included political, security, and constitutional arrangements intended to lay the foundation for a transitional phase leading to comprehensive elections

and a new constitution.

Although the initiative opened the door to a transitional period that was supposed to pave the way for building a democratic state founded on pluralism and justice, this phase quickly encountered major obstacles: fragile state institutions, the absence of an inclusive national project, the spread of political violence, worsening economic crises, and the inability of the transitional authority to assert its sovereignty on the ground.

The Fall of Sana'a

During 2013 and 2014, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group began expanding by force of arms beyond their stronghold in Saada into Al-Jawf, Amran, and Hajjah, eventually seizing full control of the capital, Sana'a, on 21 September 2014. Afterward, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group imposed de facto authority, effectively dismantled existing state institutions, and in February 2015 issued what they called the Constitutional Declaration. From that point onward, security agencies became tools in the hands of the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group to pursue political opponents. Widespread practices of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance targeted political rivals, journalists, academics, human rights activists, and even ordinary civilians.

Detainees were often transferred to unacknowledged detention sites—such as house basements or secret military facilities—denied contact with the outside world, and subjected to inhumane conditions. This pointed to a systematic and widespread practice that rose to the level of crimes against humanity.

The Saudi/UAE-Led Coalition

When the Saudi/UAE-led coalition announced the launch of a military operation against the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group forces and their former ally Saleh on 26 March 2015, the situation in Yemen escalated into a broader armed conflict. Coalition forces themselves became implicated in committing enforced disappearances on a large scale across Yemen.

Yemeni Parties to Conflict

Several Yemeni factions confronted the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group at the invitation of the Saudi/UAE-led coalition, which came to control at least 70% of Yemen's territory. Areas under the control of coalition-backed forces—including Aden, Taiz, Marib, Shabwah, Hadhramout, Lahj, and others—witnessed enforced disappearances perpetrated by security and military units linked to the internationally recognized government and the Saudi/UAE-led coalition.

As the conflict dragged on, new local actors emerged—foremost among them the Southern

Transitional Council (STC), established in 2017 with direct Emirati support. The STC and its affiliated security and military formations extended their military control over Aden and parts of Lahj, Abyan, and Al-Dhale', establishing parallel authorities to the official state. Through its Security Belt forces and elite units, the STC carried out systematic violations, including enforced disappearances of political opponents, members of the southern movement opposed to the STC's policies, and ordinary citizens suspected of dissent. Such arrests often took place outside the framework of the law, with victims held in secret prisons not subject to judicial or humanitarian oversight.

Regional powers involved in the conflict—particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia—also played a direct role in supporting local actors who used enforced disappearance as a means of consolidating security control. Unofficial prisons were established under the supervision of foreign forces or their local allies, and the fate of many detainees in these facilities remains unknown despite appeals from their families and documentation by human rights organizations.

Over time, as the conflict's geography and control map grew more complex, enforced disappearance became a persistent pattern in the conduct of all parties to the Yemeni conflict. These violations went beyond isolated incidents to become a deliberate and generalized policy through which public life was managed by the logic of force, with each authority acting as an independent entity imposing laws and carrying out judgments without any legal accountability.

In this context, and amid a climate of impunity, Yemen has become a fertile ground for enforced disappearance and other violations and crimes. With the absence of an effective national justice system and the lack of political will to halt these abuses, opportunities for redress have vanished, victims' rights have been neglected, and trust between citizens and the authorities has disintegrated. This has resulted in devastating psychological, social, and humanitarian consequences that affect not only the victims themselves, but also their families and communities—threatening further division and fragmentation of the national fabric. Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance have escalated to such an extent that the trajectory of the conflict has become a mirror of state collapse and the disintegration of its institutions. Unlawful arrests and secret detention centers for enforced disappearance have become a cornerstone of the policies of every party to the conflict.

In December 2018, as part of UN-regional diplomatic efforts to revive peace, the

Stockholm Agreement¹¹ was reached under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The agreement included a provision establishing an implementation mechanism for a prisoner-exchange arrangement. The agreement used the term “prisoners” despite the fact that many of the victims were civilians who had been arbitrarily detained. Both the “internationally recognized government” and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group committed to releasing all detained persons. The agreement also provided for the formation of a trusted “technical committee,” involving the United Nations and the ICRC, to review the lists of detainees and verify their conditions¹².

The Stockholm Agreement, concluded between the Yemeni government and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, did not explicitly address the issue of those subjected to enforced disappearance, even though it dealt with the detainees and prisoners file under humanitarian provisions intended to build trust. The section on prisoners was limited to exchanging lists and releasing detainees from both sides, without reference to cases that constitute enforced disappearance. This omission failed to deliver justice to the victims or their families, leaving the enforced disappearance file in a state of legal and humanitarian neglect.

Through mediation by the UN Special Envoy to Yemen and with the assistance of the ICRC, the warring parties released 730 detainees on 14 October 2020 as a first phase. On 14, 15, and 16 April 2023, they released approximately 900 detainees as a second phase. Subsequent rounds of negotiations for further releases later stalled.

11 United Nations Mission to support the Stockholm Agreement in Yemen. (2018). Stockholm Agreement. <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/ar/%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%83%D9%87%D9%88%D9%84%D9%85>.

12 A Research Paper Addressing Challenges and Proposing Solutions, <https://www.mwatana.org/reports-en/crimes-of-enforced-disappearance>.

Chapter Two

Legal Framework

Definition of Enforced Disappearance and Its Distinction from Other Forms of Deprivation of Liberty

The term enforced disappearance refers to any act involving abduction, arrest, detention, or any form of deprivation of liberty carried out by official state authorities, or by non-state actors acting on behalf of the state, with its authorization, support, or acquiescence. Such acts may be committed directly by the competent authorities or indirectly through parties operating on their behalf or within the scope of their effective control—whether such authority is a national government or a de facto power in a specific territory¹³.

These acts are typically followed by the authorities' refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty, denial of the detainee's existence, or refusal to disclose the person's whereabouts or fate. As a result, the disappeared individual is completely cut off from the outside world, deprived of the most basic legal rights—such as contacting family, obtaining legal counsel, or appearing before a judicial authority—and denied any form of legal protection or safeguard.

What gives enforced disappearance its distinctive nature and sets it apart from other crimes, such as arbitrary arrest or detention, is the element of deliberate denial and concealment by the perpetrating authority. This renders the fate and location of the person entirely unknown, eliminating any possibility of protecting them or ensuring their safety, and exposing them to multiple grave violations, including torture, extrajudicial killing, or summary execution.

While certain governmental authorities may engage in acts of arbitrary arrest or detention in violation of the law, such acts—serious as they are—do not in themselves amount to the crime of enforced disappearance unless accompanied by an official denial of the detention or a refusal to disclose the person's fate or place of confinement. The fundamental difference between the two lies in the fact that arbitrary detention is often, to some extent, documented or acknowledged, even if unlawful, whereas enforced disappearance seeks to erase the person entirely from both legal and physical existence. It constitutes a distinct and more severe crime, as it entails the deliberate denial of fundamental rights and the intentional erasure of the identity and human existence of the disappeared person.

13 Ibid.

Criteria for Distinguishing Between Arbitrary Detention and Enforced Disappearance

Legal Basis

In arbitrary detention, the legal grounds for holding a person are either unclear, lacking entirely, or fall outside the scope permitted by law—constituting a clear violation of procedural guarantees provided by law.

In enforced disappearance, the very fact of the detention is denied altogether, thereby removing the person entirely from the realm of legal protection.

Official Notification

In arbitrary detention, the detainee is deprived of the official notification of the reasons for their detention as required by law, and may be held for an indefinite period without informing them or their relatives.

In enforced disappearance, the authorities deny the person's existence or detention entirely, issuing no form of official notification, thereby deepening their legal and physical concealment.

Record-Keeping

In arbitrary detention, the case may be recorded, though often without due process or transparency. In enforced disappearance, the victim is not recorded in any official register at all, and their identity and whereabouts are deliberately concealed.

Contact with the Outside World

In arbitrary detention, the person may be denied contact with the outside world—whether with family or legal counsel—for varying periods, undermining their right to defense and communication. In enforced disappearance, the person is entirely deprived of any form of contact, greatly heightening the severity of the violation and preventing any oversight or accountability.

Right to Appear Before a Court

In arbitrary detention, the detainee may be denied prompt access to a court or brought before it only after prolonged delays, in clear violation of the law.

In enforced disappearance, this right is completely unavailable, as the authorities deny the detention altogether, making legal accountability impossible.

It is worth noting that the act of detention may initially be witnessed or documented—whether by family members or other eyewitnesses—but when the relatives of the detainee attempt to search for them or inquire with the authority that carried out the arrest, such inquiries are often met with outright denial. This includes denying the fact of the detention itself, as well as withholding any information about the person’s whereabouts or condition. This deliberate denial is a core element in the definition of enforced disappearance and is what distinguishes it from other similar violations.

Prohibition of Enforced Disappearance under International Human Rights Law

Enforced disappearance constitutes a composite crime that entails the systematic and direct violation of a range of fundamental legal rights and safeguards enshrined in international human rights law, to which the vast majority of the world’s states, including Yemen, have committed themselves. This crime not only affects the individual who has been forcibly disappeared, but also extends its impact to their family and community, causing severe psychological and social suffering.

Enforced disappearance stands in stark contradiction to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the foundational document of the international human rights protection system. Article 9 of the Declaration stipulates that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile,” meaning that any form of arbitrary deprivation of liberty—as occurs in cases of enforced disappearance—constitutes an absolute and unjustifiable violation¹⁴.

The crime is not only incompatible with the Declaration; it also constitutes an explicit breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, particularly the provisions relating to the right to life, liberty, personal security, and protection from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment¹⁵. Furthermore, it undermines rights related to family stability and livelihood as set forth in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights¹⁶.

International human rights law rests upon an integrated legal framework, deriving its legitimacy from written sources such as treaties and conventions, as well as customary norms developed through international practice and collective consensus. These legal instruments serve as binding references for state parties, which have pledged to uphold human dignity and guarantee the fundamental rights and freedoms of all individuals

14 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 9.

15 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 9 and 10.

16 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 10.

without discrimination.

In light of these instruments and principles, the prohibition of enforced disappearance has become an integral part of the international legal framework for the protection of human rights. This imposes a clear obligation on states to adopt effective legislative and institutional measures to prevent this crime, prosecute perpetrators, and guarantee victims' rights to remedy and accountability.

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance marks a milestone in the development of international human rights law. It is the first binding international instrument dedicated exclusively to enforced disappearance—covering its definition, criminalization, prevention, and punishment—while also safeguarding the rights of victims and their families. The Convention was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 December 2006 under Resolution A/RES/61/177, and entered into force on 23 December 2010. It affirms that enforced disappearance not only constitutes a grave violation of human rights, but under certain circumstances may amount to a crime against humanity, underscoring its destabilizing effect on societies and the rule of law.

One of the most significant aspects of the Convention is found in Article 24, which broadens the concept of “victim.” The Convention does not limit the term to the person subjected to enforced disappearance; it also encompasses any individual who has suffered direct harm as a result of the act, particularly members of the disappeared person’s family.

This expanded definition reflects a deep understanding of the complex nature of enforced disappearance, which affects not only the disappeared individual but also has profound psychological, social, and legal repercussions on those around them—especially family members, who endure ongoing suffering due to uncertainty about their loved one’s fate, and who are deprived of fundamental rights such as the right to truth, justice, and accountability.

Key Features of the Convention:

- **Independent and Explicit Criminalization of Enforced Disappearance:** The Convention is the first binding international instrument to define enforced disappearance and criminalize it as a stand-alone offense, without the need to link it to other violations.
- **Absolute Right Not to Be Subjected to Enforced Disappearance:** Article 1 stipulates that the prohibition of enforced disappearance is absolute and may not be restricted

or justified under any circumstances, including states of emergency, armed conflicts, or political crises¹⁷.

- **Classification of Enforced Disappearance as a Crime Against Humanity:** Under Article 5, the Convention recognizes that when enforced disappearance is committed on a widespread or systematic basis, it constitutes a crime against humanity, making it imprescriptible and subject to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court¹⁸.
- **Recognition of Victims' Rights:** The Convention affirms the right of victims and their families to know the truth about the fate and circumstances of disappeared persons, and grants them the right to redress, material and moral compensation, rehabilitation, and restoration of dignity¹⁹.
- **Prohibition of Secret Detention and Guarantee of Transparency:** States are required to establish a national register of all persons in detention and to provide necessary information about places of detention, thereby preventing unrecorded detention and strengthening judicial oversight²⁰.
- **Effective Mechanisms for Monitoring and Accountability:** The Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) was established as an independent international body to oversee implementation of the Convention's provisions, receive state reports, consider individual complaints, and activate urgent procedures to search for disappeared persons²¹.
- **Obligation to Provide a Comprehensive Justice System:** States parties must adopt effective legislative and administrative measures to criminalize enforced disappearance and hold perpetrators accountable—whether acting in an official or unofficial capacity—and are encouraged to establish independent national institutions to prevent the recurrence of the crime²².
- **Principle of Universal Jurisdiction:** The Convention obliges states to prosecute offenders present on their territory, even if they are not nationals and the crime was

17 The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, article 1.

18 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 5.

19 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 24.

20 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 17.

21 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, articles 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33.

22 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 4.

not committed within their jurisdiction, reinforcing the principle of no impunity²³.

- **Special Protection for Children:** The Convention contains provisions for the protection of children born during secret detention or separated from their families, prohibits altering their identities, and guarantees their right to recover their names, families, and nationalities²⁴.

Core Obligations on States Parties under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance:

- **Criminalization in Domestic Law:** States parties must incorporate enforced disappearance as a distinct criminal offense in their penal codes, consistent with the Convention's definition²⁵.
- **Prompt and Effective Investigation:** States must investigate every case of enforced disappearance and take legal measures to bring those responsible before fair courts²⁶.
- **Prevention and Non-Recurrence:** Measures include enacting laws, training public officials, establishing independent oversight mechanisms, and ensuring transparency in arrest and detention procedures²⁷.
- **Protection of Victims and Witnesses:** States parties are obliged to provide legal protection to victims, their families, and witnesses from any threats or reprisals resulting from cooperation with authorities or filing complaints²⁸.
- **Guaranteeing Victims' Rights to Remedy and Compensation:** States parties must ensure victims' rights to reparation, rehabilitation, and guarantees of non-recurrence²⁹.
- **International Cooperation:** The Convention requires states to engage in judicial and technical cooperation to combat this crime, including extradition of offenders when necessary³⁰.
- **Reporting to the Committee:** States parties must submit periodic reports to the

23 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, articles 9 and 11.

24 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 25.

25 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 4.

26 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 12.

27 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 23.

28 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 12/1.

29 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 24.

30 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, articles 14 and 15.

Committee on Enforced Disappearances on measures taken to implement the Convention and must cooperate fully with it³¹.

- **Right to the Truth:** The Convention affirms the right to know the truth by guaranteeing transparent, independent investigations into incidents of enforced disappearance, sharing findings with victims and their families, providing access to archives, and protecting witnesses. This right cannot be restricted under any exceptional circumstances, thereby reinforcing transparency and enabling victims to obtain the justice they deserve.
- **Centralized and Updated Registers:** States parties bear a significant responsibility to establish centralized, regularly updated registers of persons deprived of liberty, containing precise details on their identities, reasons for detention, locations, and any transfers or deaths in custody. These registers must be accessible to judicial bodies and competent authorities, ensuring transparency and enabling all relevant actors to access such information promptly and easily.

Although the Yemeni government formally expressed its approval to accede to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance—through a Cabinet resolution issued on 11 June 2013—Yemen has, to date, not completed the legal ratification procedures necessary to become an official State Party to the Convention³². This means that the Convention has not entered into force for Yemen, and the country remains outside the binding legal framework of its international provisions, despite repeated calls from human rights and international organizations to expedite ratification in light of the widespread crimes of enforced disappearance occurring during the ongoing conflict³³.

Enforced Disappearance under the Four Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols

Common Article 3 to the four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 established a fundamental prohibition on enforced disappearance in armed conflicts, including non-international conflicts, even though the term “enforced disappearance” is not explicitly mentioned. It obliges all parties to treat humanely all persons who have laid down their

31 The International Convention for the Protection of All Person from Enforced Disappearance, article 29.

32 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Status of Yemen's ratification of international human rights treaties, available on the official United Nations website: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=193&Lang=en.

33 Report of the Secretary-General to the Human Rights Council, twenty-fourth session, agenda item 10, document A/HRC/24/34, dated 25 July 2013, available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/A_HRC_24_34.pdf.

arms or ceased to take part in hostilities, and prohibits murder, torture, cruel or degrading treatment, hostage-taking, and the passing of sentences without a fair trial³⁴. When a person is secretly detained and their detention is denied or their whereabouts concealed, the victim is deprived of fair trial guarantees and humane treatment, thus constituting enforced disappearance—an act combining arbitrary detention with the deliberate denial of existence, placing the victim entirely outside the protection of the law.

Additional Protocol II (1977) reinforced this prohibition by setting out further guarantees for all persons detained in non-international armed conflicts. Article 4 enshrines the general principle of humane treatment, prohibiting killing, torture, inhumane treatment, threats, and hostage-taking³⁵. Under enforced disappearance, victims are sometimes forced into coerced confessions or isolated completely from the outside world—acts that grossly violate this article. Article 5 requires parties to ensure humane conditions of detention, including prompt notification of arrest, the right to correspondence, and the right to visits³⁶. Article 6 affirms the right of detainees to a fair trial before an independent and impartial judicial authority³⁷.

Article 32 of Additional Protocol I (1977) recognizes the right of families to know the fate of their disappeared relatives as a general guiding principle, reinforcing the commitment of states, armed parties, and humanitarian organizations to the continuous search for missing persons and their remains³⁸.

In examining preventive measures to avoid persons being classified as missing, it is clear that states and armed parties must establish effective identification mechanisms—such as issuing identity cards, military service cards, or distinctive tags to enable tracking of individuals within armed forces or groups³⁹; permitting detainees to communicate with their families under appropriate safeguards to ensure their safety⁴⁰; and creating national information bureaus or official services to record graves and missing persons reports, as stipulated in the Geneva Conventions.⁴¹ This also includes registering available death certificates and managing human remains with dignity⁴².

34 Common Article 3 to the four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949.

35 Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, Article 4 (2) (a, c, e) and 8, June 1977.

36 Additional Protocol II, Article 5 (1) (b-d), 8 June 1977.

37 Additional Protocol II, Article 6, 8 June 1977.

38 Additional Protocol I, Article 32, 8 June 1977.

39 ICRC, Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Commentary on Articles 122–123 (Reporting and Inquiry Mechanisms).

40 Additional Protocol II, Article 5 (1) (b-d), 1977.

41 Fourth Geneva Convention, Articles 136–140; Additional Protocol II, Article 5.

42 ICRC, Guidelines on the Protection of the Dead under IHL, a study on the management of Human Remains.

This integrated framework of treaty-based and customary norms—from Common Article 3, to the provisions of the Additional Protocols, to customary international law—reflects the commitment of the international community to ensuring that enforced disappearance does not go unpunished, and to enabling victims' families to learn the fate of their loved ones while preserving their dignity, whether in life or in death.

Enforced Disappearance in Customary International Humanitarian Law

Customary international humanitarian law (IHL) is a fundamental pillar in the protection of individuals during armed conflicts, whether international or non-international. This body of law is unwritten, deriving from consistent and general international practice accepted as law, making it binding on all states, including those that have not ratified the relevant international treaties. Its rules are drawn from "general practice accepted as law," as stipulated in Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice.

The importance of customary IHL lies in its ability to address gaps in the protection of civilians and combatants outside the scope of treaty law—particularly in non-international armed conflicts, which constitute the majority of current conflict situations. In fact, the legal framework governing internal armed conflicts is more detailed under customary international law than under treaty law, thereby strengthening victim protection in such contexts.

To reinforce this legal framework, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) launched in 1996 an extensive study, in collaboration with a group of international experts, to collect and analyze state practice in the field of armed conflict. This effort culminated in 2005 with the publication of a comprehensive reference containing 161 customary rules binding on all parties to a conflict, offering uniform protection regardless of the political or legal classification of the conflict⁴³.

Among the prominent issues addressed by customary IHL is the phenomenon of enforced disappearance, which is prohibited in both international and non-international armed conflicts. Rule 98, contained in Volume II, Chapter 32, Section (L) of the ICRC Study, addresses enforced disappearance, noting that while IHL treaties do not explicitly use the term, committing such acts constitutes—or threatens to constitute—a violation of several fundamental customary rules of IHL. These include the prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The rule stresses that in non-international armed conflicts, parties are obliged to take effective

43 International Committee of the Red Cross. Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume 1, 2007.

measures to prevent enforced disappearance, including registering all persons deprived of their liberty and safeguarding family contact⁴⁴.

Rule 98 further affirms that every instance of enforced disappearance constitutes a dual violation—of both IHL and international human rights law. When committed on a widespread or systematic scale, it qualifies as a crime against humanity, subject to accountability under international criminal law. The rule also highlights the existence of extensive state practice confirming that the prohibition of enforced disappearance entails a duty to investigate every alleged case, reflecting both a legal and moral obligation on states and conflict parties to uncover the truth and ensure justice for victims and their families.

In 1981, the 24th International Conference of the Red Cross declared that enforced disappearance constitutes a grave violation of several fundamental human rights, including the right to life, liberty, and physical and mental integrity, as well as protection from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The Conference also stressed that enforced disappearance undermines basic legal safeguards, such as the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention, and the right to a fair and public trial. This position strengthened international recognition of the gravity of this practice and its stark incompatibility with humanitarian principles and international law⁴⁵.

International practice has since evolved to cover not only missing or forcibly disappeared civilians and other non-combatants, but also members of the armed forces reported missing by the adverse party, in both international and non-international armed conflicts, in accordance with Rule 117⁴⁶. This expansion reflects the principle that all missing persons, regardless of their status or affiliation, share the same right to have their fate determined and reported.

The rule also underscores the importance of recording all available information on deceased persons before disposing of their remains—an essential step in documenting deaths and ensuring proper identification of bodies in the future. This requirement applies in all types of conflicts, whether international or non-international. International practice confirms that this is a due diligence obligation, meaning that parties must take active measures, including, where necessary, searching for and exhuming graves and analyzing evidence, to determine the fate of the missing. This is grounded in the legitimate right of the families of the missing to know the truth.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 International Committee of the Red Cross. Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume II, Chapter 36, Section A.

Enforced Disappearance under the Rome Statute

The Rome Statute explicitly includes enforced disappearance among the crimes falling within the subject-matter jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Article 7(1) (i) stipulates that the “enforced disappearance of persons” constitutes a crime against humanity when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population⁴⁷.

Article 7(2)(i) defines this crime as:

“the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorization, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organization, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of freedom or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law for a prolonged period of time.”

Although the Rome Statute lists enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity, its consequences often amount to other serious violations that may fall under the category of war crimes. Article 8(2)(b) recognizes “outrages upon personal dignity” as a form of war crime—applicable to enforced disappearance when accompanied by inhumane or degrading conditions of detention, or when committed in the context of an international or non-international armed conflict.

This is reinforced by Article 8(6), which classifies as a war crime the “wilful deprivation of the rights of fair and regular trial” for prisoners of war or other protected persons. This applies to victims of enforced disappearance, who are denied their most basic legal rights, including recognition of their legal existence and the right to appear before a judge⁴⁸.

Accordingly, in certain contexts, enforced disappearance can also be prosecuted as a war crime, particularly when committed in the course of armed conflict and when its constitutive elements meet the Rome Statute’s definition of war crimes.

Enforced disappearance is considered a continuing crime, meaning that it does not cease nor is it deemed completed until the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person is revealed. This characteristic allows for the prosecution of its perpetrators even long after the act began.

The Rome Statute addresses this feature in Article 29, which clearly stipulates that crimes

47 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998.

48 Rome Statute, Article 8 (6).

within the Court's jurisdiction—including enforced disappearance—are not subject to any statute of limitations. This constitutes a critical legal safeguard, ensuring that victims and their families may seek justice without temporal restrictions⁴⁹.

By contrast, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006) in Article 8 allows for the application of statutes of limitations to this crime, while recognizing its continuous nature. The Convention stipulates that limitation periods should commence from the time the enforced disappearance ceases and must be long enough and proportionate to the gravity of the offense, without prejudicing victims' rights to effective remedies.

Thus, while the Rome Statute absolutely rejects prescription for such crimes, the Convention permits conditional limitation periods. This divergence underscores the need to examine carefully the coherence and complementarity of international legal frameworks when dealing with protracted and complex crimes such as enforced disappearance.

Yemen signed the Rome Statute on 28 December 2000 but has not ratified it⁵⁰. However, lack of ratification does not preclude reliance on the Statute's principles and provisions as an authoritative international legal reference for classifying international crimes and grave violations committed in armed conflict, especially in relation to enforced disappearance.

Moreover, invoking the Rome Statute in non-party states can help increase international pressure and provide a solid legal basis for claims grounded in customary international law—particularly with respect to serious international crimes such as enforced disappearance, which engage state responsibility and are subject to universal jurisdiction.

Therefore, while the absence of formal accession to the ICC poses an obstacle, it does not preclude the pursuit of justice. Rather, it may serve as a catalyst for investing in alternative accountability avenues—such as recourse to United Nations treaty and non-treaty mechanisms, the establishment of independent investigative commissions, and the strengthening of civil society organizations in documenting violations and building legal case files that could form the foundation for future prosecutions before national or international judicial bodies.

49 Rome Statute, Article 29.

50 Parliamentarians for Global Action. (n.d.). Yemen and the Rome Statute. Retrieved June 22, 2025, from <https://www.pgaction.org/ilhr/rome-statute/me-med/yemen.html>.

Enforced Disappearance in National Legislation

In the Yemeni context, the legislature has not yet enacted a specific law criminalizing “enforced disappearance” as a distinct offense, nor has the term “enforced disappearance” been explicitly mentioned in any of the applicable legal provisions. However, the absence of such a specific legislative text does not necessarily mean that the Yemeni legal system completely lacks the legal means to address this crime. The Yemeni Constitution and several relevant laws contain dispersed legal safeguards that, taken together, form a legal foundation from which to combat enforced disappearance and hold its perpetrators accountable.

Article 6 of the Yemeni Constitution stipulates the State’s commitment to international treaties and conventions it has ratified, including the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—international instruments that criminalize enforced disappearance as a grave violation of human rights⁵¹. Article 47 establishes the principle of criminal legality, stating that no act is a crime and no penalty may be imposed except by virtue of a Sharia or legal provision. This obligates the State to provide clear definitions of crimes and their constituent elements, including acts that infringe upon personal liberty and human dignity⁵².

Article 48 reinforces this protection by affirming that personal freedom is inviolable and may only be restricted by a judicial order. It also prohibits detention outside facilities regulated by the Prisons Law and criminalizes all forms of torture and cruel or inhuman treatment⁵³.

These constitutional principles are reflected in several laws, most notably Law No. 12 of 1994 on Crimes and Penalties. Article 246 of this law criminalizes unlawful arrest or detention, with harsher penalties if the act is committed by a public official, involves the use of weapons, targets a minor, or is committed against a person lacking mental capacity. Moreover, article 247 criminalizes the establishment of unauthorized detention facilities, while Article 249 addresses the crime of kidnapping, imposing varying penalties depending on the gravity of the accompanying acts—up to and including the death penalty if the kidnapping results in killing or sexual assault.

Similarly, Law No. 13 of 1994 on Criminal Procedure enshrines in its opening articles the principle of individual criminal responsibility and the presumption of innocence. Article 6 prohibits the use of torture or coercion to extract confessions, rendering null any confession obtained through physical or psychological harm. Articles 12–14 require judicial

51 Yemeni Constitution, Article 6.

52 Yemeni Constitution, Article 47.

53 Yemeni Constitution, Article 48.

authorization for the search of residences, while Article 16 stipulates that crimes affecting liberty and dignity are not subject to a statute of limitations—naturally encompassing the crime of enforced disappearance⁵⁴.

Along the same lines, the Law No. 48 of 1991 on the Organization of Prisons, as amended by Law No. 26 of 2003, sets strict conditions for admission into prisons. Article 8 prohibits the imprisonment of any person without a written judicial order or a final judgment, and Article 10 obligates prison administrations to admit no person except pursuant to enforceable judicial rulings or orders from the Public Prosecution in cases of pre-trial detention.

These provisions affirm that detention must occur in lawful facilities and through lawful procedures, providing a fundamental safeguard against arbitrary detention and laying a legal groundwork for prosecuting enforced disappearance cases, despite the absence of a specific provision.

Referring back to Article 246 of the Crimes and Penalties Law, titled “Restriction of Liberty,” the legislator prescribes a prison sentence of up to three years for anyone who unlawfully arrests, detains, or otherwise deprives a person of their liberty. The penalty increases to five years in aggravated circumstances, such as when the offender is a public official or equivalent, uses a weapon, acts in concert with others, targets a minor or a person lacking mental capacity, or exposes the victim’s life to danger⁵⁵.

Article 249 criminalizes kidnapping, with penalties ranging from imprisonment of up to five years to harsher sentences if the crime is committed with force or against vulnerable persons. The death penalty applies if the kidnapping is followed by killing or sexual assault⁵⁶.

It is worth noting that the Anti-Kidnapping and Highway Robbery Law, as a special law, takes precedence over general provisions like Article 249 in cases of conflict, in accordance with the legal maxim “the special prevails over the general.” Article 1 of this law provides that if a person or group leads a gang dedicated to kidnapping, highway robbery, or the forcible seizure of public or private property, they shall be punished by death—a penalty that also applies to all participants alongside the gang leader⁵⁷.

Article 2 of the Anti-Kidnapping and Highway Robbery Law addresses the crime of kidnapping itself, criminalizing the abduction of any person with imprisonment for no less than twelve years and no more than fifteen. If the victim is a woman or minor, the penalty

54 Law No. 13 of 1994 on Criminal Procedure, Articles 6, 12, 14, and 16.

55 Law No. 12 of 1994 on Crimes and Penalties, Article 246.

56 Law No. 12 of 1994 on Crimes and Penalties, Article 249.

57 Anti-Kidnapping and Highway Robbery Law, Article 1.

increases to twenty years. Where kidnapping is accompanied by physical harm or assault, the prison term may extend to twenty-five years, and in cases where the crime ends in killing or sexual assault, the death penalty applies⁵⁸.

Article 8 doubles all the aforementioned penalties if the perpetrator is a member of the state armed forces, security forces, or a public official⁵⁹.

In light of the above, it is evident that although the Yemeni legislator has not set forth a specific provision criminalizing enforced disappearance, it has criminalized its constituent acts through multiple legal provisions. This allows for building a legal approach—grounded in general rules—that can be employed by lawyers, civil society organizations, and the Public Prosecution to legally characterize enforced disappearance and pursue its perpetrators, relying on constitutional principles and international obligations.

Remains of Victims of Enforced Disappearance and Mass Graves in International Law

The fate of the bodies of victims of enforced disappearance and their presence in mass graves represents one of the most striking dimensions of this compounded crime. The violation does not end with depriving the victim of liberty and life, but extends to denying their relatives the right to bury them and to know their fate.

To safeguard the dignity of the dead and the rights of their families, the status of the remains of victims of enforced disappearance and the sites of mass graves has been accorded significant prominence in international legal instruments. Treaties and customary rules stipulate the need to respect the remains of the deceased, prevent tampering, and ensure their recovery.

Article 15 of the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance* obligates States to fully cooperate in searching for those forcibly disappeared, determining their whereabouts, and securing their release. In the event of death, States are required to exhume the remains, establish their identity, and rebury them⁶⁰.

Article 17 of the Convention requires each State Party to maintain official registers or records containing the names of all persons deprived of liberty. These registers must include, at a minimum, detailed information on the circumstances and causes of death, as well as the authority to which the remains were transferred when a person dies while in custody.

58 Anti-Kidnapping and Highway Robbery Law, Article 2.

59 Anti-Kidnapping and Highway Robbery Law, Article 8.

60 The International Convention for the Protection of All Victims of Enforced Disappearance, Article 15.

Suspended Fates

Such records must be updated immediately and kept available to any judicial authority or other competent and qualified institution—either under national legislation or international instruments to which the State is party—for consultation whenever requested⁶¹.

Article 18 guarantees the right of relatives of detainees or their legal representatives to access this information immediately upon request, provided they establish a legitimate interest, enabling them to learn exactly what happened to their loved ones⁶².

The responsibility of States goes beyond documentation. They must take all appropriate measures to search for persons subjected to enforced disappearance, identify their places of detention, and secure their release if alive. If they are found to have died, States must also take all necessary steps to locate their remains with precision, respect their dignity, and either rebury them or hand them over to their relatives⁶³.

The Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 require parties to an armed conflict to respect the bodies of the dead, prohibit their desecration or looting, and record the locations of both individual and mass graves, placing them under official management to ensure future visits. The 1977 Additional Protocols of Geneva Conventions expanded these obligations, committing parties to a strict duty to search for, collect, and evacuate the bodies of the deceased without discrimination, to return the remains and the victims' personal belongings upon request by the State of nationality or their families, and to issue official burial certificates accurately identifying the deceased⁶⁴.

61 The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Article 17.

62 The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Article 18 (1/g).

63 The International Convention for the Protection of All Victims of Enforced Disappearance, Article 24 (3).

64 The Four Geneva Conventions of 1949.

Chapter Three

Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Yemen

Since the very outset of the conflict, the various parties to the war in Yemen have persistently committed the crime of enforced disappearance against hundreds of individuals—in flagrant violation of all written and customary national and international laws criminalizing this act.

Between September 2014 and July 2025, Mwatana for Human Rights documented at least 1,592 incidents of enforced disappearance affecting no fewer than 2,120 victims. Of these:

- The Ansar Allah group (Houthi) group is responsible for 756 incidents involving 897 victims.
- The internationally recognized government forces are responsible for 351 incidents involving 449 victims.
- The Saudi/UAE-led coalition is responsible for 65 incidents involving 91 victims.
- The Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces are responsible for 387 incidents involving 630 victims.
- The Joint Forces are responsible for 15 incidents involving 21 victims.
- Eritrean forces are responsible for 5 incidents involving 19 victims.
- Terrorist organizations are responsible for 13 incidents involving 13 victims of enforced disappearance.

This chapter presents examples of enforced disappearance crimes committed by the different parties to the conflict.

Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) Group

Since seizing control of Sana'a on 21 September 2014, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group has turned enforced disappearance into a systematic tool to consolidate power and silence dissent. Over the past ten years, Mwatana for Human Rights has documented at least 756 incidents of enforced disappearance involving 897 victims in areas under the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group control, including Sana'a, Al Hudaydah, Ibb, Dhamar, Saada, and Hajjah, as well as parts of Taiz.

In many cases, arrests were carried out without any judicial warrants, with individuals taken to undisclosed locations where they were denied contact with their families or access

to legal assistance, only for the group to later deny holding them.

Following the intervention of the Saudi/UAE-led coalition on 26 March 2015, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group escalated its security campaign—targeting political opponents, journalists, human rights activists, members of religious minorities, ordinary civilian travelers, and anyone suspected of having ties to the coalition or perceived as a potential threat to its existence.

Detention and enforced disappearance became tools of intimidation. The Ansar Allah (Houthi) group has recorded coerced confessions and broadcast them on official channels, including Al-Masirah tv channel, often years after having denied holding the victims. This system is overseen by a sprawling security apparatus that, at times, even obstructs orders by the group's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, to release detainees. Meanwhile, victims' families are subjected to psychological and financial extortion.

**Mohammed Qahtan – 56 years old,
senior leader in the Islah Party (Amanat Al-Asimah)**

On the afternoon of Saturday, April 4, 2015, after more than a week of being placed under house arrest, three vehicles carrying armed members of the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group surrounded the home of Mohammed Qahtan, a senior figure in the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah Party). He was initially detained along with his son-in-law at the residence of



Ali Mohsen, which the Houthis had converted into a detention center. He was later transferred to the home of another Islah leader, Hamid al-Ahmar, which the Houthis had also seized and turned into a detention site. His family was permitted to visit him only once, after mediation by senior Houthi figures, a few days after his detention. His fate has remained unknown from that time until the writing of this report.

**Wahid Al-Soufi – 40 years old,
journalist (Sana'a)**

On April 6, 2015, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group detained Wahid Al-Soufi, 40, editor-in-chief of AL-Arabia newspaper and director of its website. On the morning of his arrest, al-Soufi was in the Faj Attan area heading toward Hadda, carrying a camera he used for his journalism work. A witness told Mwatana that at around 7:00 p.m. that day, he saw two armed Houthi fighters escorting Al-Soufi from inside the AL-Tahrir Post Office in the Amanat Al-Asimah to a white Toyota Land Cruiser with no license plate, which then left the scene. Its destination was unknown. According to al-Soufi's family, they tried to contact police stations, the public prosecutor's office, hospitals, the Criminal Investigation Department, the Political Security Organization, and the National Security Bureau, but were unable to locate him⁶⁵.



**Hussein Hammoud Al-Hadi – 55 years old –
Tribal Sheikh (Amanat Al-Asimah)**

"They told us: his friends came and took him."

On the evening of Saturday, October 8, 2016, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group abducted one of the tribal sheikhs of Khawlan, Hussein Hammoud Al-Hadi, aged 55, from the Modern German Hospital in the Amanat Al-Asimah of Sana'a. He had been transferred there after being injured in the bombing of the Great Hall south of Sana'a by the Saudi/UAE-led coalition air forces. Hussein Al-Hadi's fate has remained unknown to this day, despite persistent efforts by his family and by Mwatana to search for him and learn his fate.



His daughter, Abeer Al-Hadi, recounts that the family began searching for him immediately. When they arrived at the bombing site, people there told them that their father had been taken to the Modern German Hospital. They went there right away and met the treating

⁶⁵ Mwatana for Human Rights, "They Are Not Here: Incidents of Arbitrary Detention and Forcibly Disappearance under Ansar Allah (Al-Houthis) Armed Group Authority in Yemen", May 2016.

physician, who reassured them that their father was in good condition, suffering only minor injuries, and added: "His friends came and took him."⁶⁶

The family was shocked by this news and requested to review the hospital's surveillance camera footage. They discovered that their father had been abducted. At that time, they had no knowledge of who had taken him or where he had been taken.

According to the victim's daughter, the family later received information that their father was being held at the Central Prison in Amran, under the control of Ansar Allah (Houthi) group. This was on October 22, 2016—14 days after he had been injured in the Great Hall (Assalah Al-Kubra) bombing in Sana'a.

Family members went to the prison hoping to see him. Upon arrival, the prison director informed them that their father was being held in connection with the Great Hall bombing case but was not allowed visits. The family was extremely concerned for his health, but the director assured them that he was in good condition and had recovered. They returned to Sana'a without being able to visit him and held a meeting at the home of Sheikh Abdulsamad Dweid, who then contacted the prison director. The director confirmed the victim's presence at the prison and promised that the family would be allowed to visit him.

The next day, members of the Bani Shaddad tribe went to visit the victim at the Central Prison in Amran, only to be surprised when the prison director denied his presence entirely and refused the visit, reneging on his earlier promise to the family.

In 2017, seven months after his enforced disappearance, the family persisted in their efforts and obtained a memorandum from the Specialized Criminal Prosecution addressed to the Political Security Organization (now the Security and Intelligence Service) allowing them to visit him. However, the Political Security Organization denied holding him.⁶⁷

The victim's family did not give up and continued to pursue the case. They knocked on every door, and in 2020 they submitted a petition to the former Attorney General demanding disclosure of his fate. The Attorney General's office director refused to let them meet the Attorney General and told them that their father was being held by the National Security Bureau. Later, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights intervened and coordinated with the Attorney General's office to arrange a family meeting with the Attorney General. The meeting did take place, but according to the victim's daughter, the Attorney General provided no useful information.

⁶⁶ An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's daughter on January 6, 2019.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

In 2023, the family submitted requests to several security agencies to find out their father's fate, but all responded that he was not in their custody. The family contacted a member of the "Supreme Political Council," who informed them that their father's case had reached the office of Abdul Malik Al-Houthi. Later, the family received a call from the Prime Minister's Office stating that Abdul Malik Al-Houthi's office had contacted them and recommended that they follow up with an Interior Ministry official regarding the case.

However, the family was unable to reach that official. On another visit to the same Supreme Political Council member they had previously contacted, they were told there were directives from Abdul Malik Al-Houthi's office to release their father—but this has not happened to date.

Around that time, Abeer says, one of her younger brother's friends contacted him and advised him to meet with someone called "M. Sh" to follow up on his father's case. When her brother met with this person and explained the situation, he was told that there were two unidentified bodies from the Great Hall bombing and that he should undergo DNA testing. Although her brother refused, "M. Sh" insisted, claiming the order came from a senior official in the Interior Ministry. The family refused the DNA test, convinced that their father was still alive and that he had been subjected to enforced disappearance.⁶⁸

Abeer wonders: "Why, after seven years from the incident, does a senior official in the Interior Ministry request a DNA test, knowing about the case since the day of the incident?"

According to the victim's daughter, their belief that he is still alive is reinforced by having heard his voice in a video broadcast by Al-Masirah channel, in which he called out to their cousin three times, as well as by the fact that his phone continued to receive the family's text messages for three months after his disappearance.

The family has endured immense hardship in following up on the case of Hussein Al-Hadi, the forcibly disappeared. In addition to the tragedy of the Great Hall bombing, and their initial optimism that their father was safe, they were devastated by his subsequent enforced disappearance.

To this day, the family of the forcibly disappeared Hussein Al-Hadi remains lost in a maze of unanswered questions and ongoing suffering—especially since the victim was the sole breadwinner for a family of seven children (five daughters and two sons). Two of his daughters have physical and intellectual disabilities. This has left the family in extremely difficult financial and psychological conditions, with their only wish being to see their father safe and reunited with them.

68 Ibid.

Suspended Fates

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through a network of lawyers across Yemen. After documenting all the details of the incident and obtaining the family's informed consent, the team follows up on complaints and contacts security and judicial authorities on the family's behalf, in an effort to uncover the victim's fate and achieve justice for him, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

**Mutaz Abdulhamid Saeed Nouman Al-Shujaifi –
26 years old – Employee (Taiz)**



"So when will the days smile upon us?"

On the evening of Monday, February 24, 2020, at around 8:00 p.m., 26-year-old Mutaz Abdulhamid Al-Shujaifi disappeared in the Al-Hawban area of Taiz, under the control of the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group. Despite the years that have passed since his disappearance, his family still has no knowledge of his fate or place of detention as of the time this report was written.

The victim's brother, Mazen, recounts the details of Mutaz's disappearance:⁶⁹

"One February evening in 2020, at around 8:00 p.m., Mutaz and I were at home when he left to an unknown destination. When I asked where he was going, he told me he would be back, leaving his mobile phone behind because the battery had run out."

Mazen continues:

"I thought he was heading to the market to buy some items, as he had planned to visit our mother, whom the war and blockade on Taiz had prevented him from seeing. My mother lives in the city, and Mutaz had been intending to travel to see her for about two days.

Night came, and we waited for Mutaz to return, but even late into the evening, he had not come back. My fear and anxiety grew, especially given the state of insecurity and the brutal war we were living through. To reassure myself, I thought maybe he couldn't wait any longer and had decided to suddenly travel toward Taiz city."

He describes his state at the time:

"I could not close my eyes that night. I kept telling myself he must be fine, that no harm had

69 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's brother on May 22, 2020.

come to him. They were long hours of worry and waiting, but it never occurred to me that I would never see my brother again—especially as he was a peaceful civilian, not aligned with any party in the war."

Mazen adds:

"Because it was late, and I needed more time to collect my thoughts, I didn't want to alarm my mother by asking about him, thinking he would return. The next morning, I called my mother, hoping he was with her. To my shock, she told me she hadn't seen him for over two months—since he had last returned to work in Al-Hawban. She also said she had tried calling him but without success."⁷⁰

"At that point," Mazen continues, "I was at a loss for words. I tried to reassure my mother that he would be fine, maybe staying with a friend, and I went straight to the Public Prosecution to file a missing person report. The case was referred to the Director of the Criminal Investigation Department to take action."

On his search efforts, Mazen says:

"I met with the Director of Criminal Investigation and explained the details. He promised to investigate, saying he would check the police stations and prisons, including the Al-Saleh detention center, but he found no trace of him. He promised to contact several district directors in Taiz to gather any possible information and to circulate my brother's picture in those districts to widen the search."

He adds: "I kept going back to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) offices regularly and sometimes called them by phone for updates. While persistently following up with some leaders affiliated with the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, one of them—who asked to remain anonymous—told me that my brother Mutaz was detained in Al-Saleh city. He asked me for a sum of money in exchange for arranging a phone call with him, promising to contact me as soon as he could."

Describing his and his family's feelings, Mazen said, "Hope returned to my heart. My family was devastated by Mutaz's disappearance, and here was a chance to hear his voice again. But hope quickly faded when that source turned off his phone, plunging us back into despair. We knocked on every door in our search for Mutaz. Along the way, we came across many stories about him, but most turned out to be attempts at extortion or emotional manipulation. We were exhausted—physically and emotionally—searching for a glimmer of hope."

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Suspended Fates

My mother has suffered greatly since his enforced disappearance. Mutaz is never far from her thoughts, and her tears have not stopped in the past three years. Her eyesight has weakened, especially since he was her youngest and most beloved child. Whenever she hears stories about people who have been detained or tortured, she immediately thinks of her son, and sinks into a bout of tears."

Mazen concludes: *"My mother has never lost hope. Her faith in God remains strong, and each day she believes more that my brother will one day see the light again and return to her arms, to the family that has lost all joy in his absence. Every occasion for happiness quickly disappears behind the pain, grief, and suffocating sorrow we live in. So, when will the days smile upon us?!"*⁷¹

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim's family, the team follows up on the case, submitting complaints and addressing security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim's fate and secure justice—regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

Khaled Ahmed Hussein Al-Sayaghi – 42 years old, employee and mosque preacher (Taiz)

"I hope my husband is still alive"

On Thursday, February 4, 2016, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group detained Khaled Ahmed Hussein Al-Sayaghi (male, 43) from a restaurant near his workplace in the Al-Howban district, Al-Qasr roundabout, Taiz governorate. He was accused of inciting against the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group by describing them as "Rawafid" [a term refers to those Shia Muslims who 'reject' the legitimacy of the caliphates of Abu Bakr], and his fate remains unknown to the date of this report.

His wife told Mwatana in a recorded interview:

"I learned about my husband's detention from his brother, a month before his death. The Ansar Allah (Houthi) group took him while he was having lunch with his friends; an armed group affiliated with the group entered and took him away from among them. He worked



71 Ibid.

for one of the Hayel Saeed Anam Group companies and also served as a Friday preacher at Al-Tawhid Mosque in the Al-Jahmaliya area. We were told that the charge against him was 'inciting against the Houthis' in his sermons, although he had stopped preaching later on."⁷²

She continued:

"His brother informed me immediately, but we received no official information about his place of detention. A month after his abduction, my father-in-law passed away; he could not bear the shock of the news. I contacted several parties in the hope of reaching him and submitted my complaint to the 'Grievances and Redress Committee' affiliated with the Ansar Allah group, but I never received a response."

She concluded:

"Today, I am forced to play the role of both mother and father, a burden beyond my capacity. I still struggle with many responsibilities my husband would have shouldered had he been here. I wish we had a government that would defend its citizens, and I pray to God that my husband is still alive and will return to us soon."⁷³

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim's family, the team follows up on the case, submitting complaints and addressing security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim's fate and secure justice—regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

Abdulbari Mohammed Ahmed Al-Katif – 52 years old, university professor (Amanat Al-Asimah)

"My brother left after a call from the Presidential Office... and never came back"

On Tuesday, August 28, 2018, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group detained Abdulbari Mohammed Ahmed Al-Katif (52 years old, academic professor) in Sana'a (Amanat Al-Asimah), took him to an undisclosed location, and subjected him to enforced disappearance, with his fate remaining unknown as of the writing of this report.

The victim's brother told Mwatana for Human Rights in an interview:

⁷² Mwatana for Human Rights, "The Unknown Fate", a documentary film, September 20, 2024: <https://www.mwatana.org/videos-en/the-unknown-fate>.

⁷³ Mwatana for Human Rights, "The Unknown Fate", a documentary film, September 20, 2024: <https://www.mwatana.org/videos-en/the-unknown-fate>.

"My brother Abdulbari worked in the United States as the head of the 'Sam bin Noah' organization concerned with human rights, even though the organization did not yet have a fully established field team. After returning to Yemen in 2018, he began forming a local team. On the day of his enforced disappearance, August 28, 2018, he received a call from an employee in the Presidential Office, left the house, and never came back. We tried calling him, but his phone was switched off. His wife told me that all contact with him had been completely cut off."⁷⁴

The victim's brother continued:

"We searched for my brother in hospitals, military camps, and security agencies, without getting any information about him. We then filed a missing person's report at Habra Police Station, where we were questioned about his work and the last time we had seen him."⁷⁵

He added:

"Four days after my brother's disappearance, my other brother received a text message from someone working at the Ministry of Defense, saying that Abdulbari was fine and in good health, that there was no need to worry about him, and that he would remain with them for some time. A month later, we contacted the same person again, but he told us he no longer knew where my brother was and could not take responsibility for his disappearance."⁷⁶

He went on:

"Two months after my brother's enforced disappearance, we reached out to several senior figures within the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group in an attempt to locate him, including the Grand Mufti of the Republic, the head of the Grievances and Redress Committee, the Speaker of Parliament, and the Attorney General. During these efforts, someone told us that Abdulbari might be detained on charges of 'collaborating with the enemy,' but he did not state this officially and confirmed that he did not know exactly where my brother was being held."⁷⁷

He concluded:

"We kept calling the complaints and reporting hotlines—199 and 189—run by the Ministry of Interior, but to no avail."

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through a network of lawyers across various parts of Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and

74 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's brother, on October 21, 2020.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

obtaining informed consent from the victim's family, the team follows up on the reports and communicates with security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, seeking to uncover the victim's fate and ensure justice for him, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

Iman Mohammed Yahya Al-Basheeri – 34 years old, homemaker (Amanat Al-Asimah)

On Friday, June 26, 2020, around noon, the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group detained Iman Mohammed Yahya Al-Basheeri (34 years old) from the Beit Ma'yad neighborhood in the Al-Sabeen District – Amanat Al-Asimah, Sana'a, and took her to an undisclosed location. She has remained a victim of enforced disappearance from that date until the preparation of this report.

This was not the first incident. Iman had previously been abducted on Monday, February 4, 2019, and remained forcibly disappeared for six months before being released in late December 2019. Upon her release, she was found in a state of extreme exhaustion, showing clear signs of torture: bruises and wounds from beatings, a shaved head, and an inability to walk—forcing her to crawl on the ground.

Following her second enforced disappearance in June 2020, her family submitted several formal requests to various authorities to determine her fate. However, the relevant authorities have not disclosed her place of detention or her legal status, and she remains disappeared to this day.

Her mother, Habiba Mohammed (60 years old), told Mwatana for Human Rights in an interview:

"My daughter disappeared twice. The first time, she had gone out to throw away the garbage, when a window-tinted vehicle with two women and a man in civilian clothing stopped next to her. They asked her for directions to the Ministry of Education. Then she felt a needle prick in her hand and lost consciousness. We searched for her for a long time but could not find her, until she called us from an unknown number and told us she was being held by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, that she didn't know exactly where she was, and asked us not to abandon her and to keep looking for her."⁷⁸

The mother continued:

78 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's mother, on August 3, 2022.

Suspended Fates

“Iman returned home one day in December 2019 in a pitiful state—she was emaciated, her head was shaved, and she bore clear signs of torture. She could only move by crawling, and she refused to speak in detail about what had happened to her. When we asked for more details, she sarcastically replied that she ‘hadn’t been in her own home to be treated well.’ She told us she had been dressed in a standard-colored prisoner’s uniform and a headscarf. After her release, she gradually began to regain her health.”⁷⁹

She added:

“Iman remained at home for only six months after her release before disappearing again—this time after going out to buy food. She never came back, and we have heard nothing from hersince.”⁸⁰

Her mother concluded:

“We don’t know where Iman is or whether she is still alive. We have knocked on every door we could.”

With assistance from Mwatana’s legal support team, the family has reported Iman’s disappearance to various security bodies and submitted legal memoranda to multiple authorities. They also filed complaints with the Attorney General, the Ministry of Interior, and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Amanat Al-Asimah, all of which denied knowledge of her whereabouts or fate.⁸¹

In another interview, Iman’s mother said:

“The last time we searched for my daughter was at the CID. At first, they denied having her, but during Ramadan in 2023, they called us and told us to bring a letter from the neighborhood supervisor and come to collect her. When we went, she wasn’t there, and they denied having her again. Later, they called us once more and asked us to bring clothes and food for Iman, but when we went, they again denied she was there and hinted that she might have run away from home and wasn’t actually missing!”

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim’s family, the team follows up on the case, submitting complaints and addressing security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim’s fate and secure justice—regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 From the legal follow-up provided by the Legal Support Unit at “Mwatana”.

Enforced Disappearance as a Tool to Target Humanitarian Workers

With the escalation of the conflict in Yemen, the humanitarian operating environment has become increasingly fragile and complex, as millions of people rely on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs amid the collapse of services and infrastructure. This deteriorating context is not solely the direct result of the war, but has been significantly worsened by repressive practices and violations committed by parties to the conflict—foremost among them the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group—which has used the crime of enforced disappearance as a double-edged weapon: targeting individuals while undermining the entire humanitarian system.

In June 2024, these violations escalated alarmingly when the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group Security and Intelligence Service carried out a series of raids and arrests targeting male and female employees of international and local humanitarian organizations. Homes and offices were stormed late at night, electronic devices were confiscated without judicial warrant, and individuals were detained in undisclosed locations without being allowed contact with their families or lawyers. Initially, their detention was denied—placing them under the legal definition of victims of enforced disappearance. This was accompanied by a disinformation campaign that included broadcasting what were alleged to be video “confessions” of espionage cells, constituting deliberate defamation and a flagrant violation of the most basic rights of detainees.⁸²

Although the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group later disclosed the places of detention—thereby converting the detainees’ status into that of arbitrarily detained persons—they nonetheless remain deprived of fundamental legal safeguards, including the right to defense and the right to receive visits. They have not been referred to the Public Prosecution or granted a fair trial. More than a year after their detention, they remain isolated from the outside world and denied their legally guaranteed rights, including the right to defend themselves, the right to communicate with a lawyer, and the right to challenge the legality of their detention before an independent judicial body. They have also been deprived of adequate healthcare and, in some cases, family visits, and are held in conditions that may amount—in certain instances—to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, in blatant violation of international human rights standards and the guarantees of liberty and personal security.

82 Mwatana for Human Rights, (2024). “Civil Society Organizations Affirm the Legitimacy, Lawfulness, and Independence of Their Operation: Call for the Release of Detainees and an End to Defamation Campaigns Against Them.” <https://www.mwatana.org/posts-en/civil-society-organizations-affirm-the-legitimacy-lawfulness-and-independence-of-their-operation>.

The danger of such violations lies not only in their individual impact, but also in their structural consequences for humanitarian operations. Targeting humanitarian workers not only intimidates staff and limits their ability to perform their duties, but also forces many humanitarian organizations to withdraw or suspend their activities due to security risks and loss of trust. This, in turn, deprives millions of Yemenis of essential services related to food, health, education, and water.

The link between enforced disappearance and the deteriorating humanitarian situation is a direct causal one: detaining and threatening humanitarian workers undermines the capacity of humanitarian institutions to respond to the crisis. Such conduct, under international humanitarian law, constitutes a clear threat to the protection of civilians during armed conflict and a blatant breach of the obligations of warring parties, who are required to ensure the safety of humanitarian personnel rather than target them.

If left unaddressed, these violations portend an even bleaker future for the humanitarian environment in Yemen, where relief activities risk being transformed from a neutral sphere into a battleground for political and security struggles, and enforced disappearance becomes a tool to drain humanitarian resources rather than merely to repress individuals.

Protecting humanitarian workers is not only a legal obligation but also a strategic necessity to ensure the flow of aid, meet the basic needs of the civilian population, and sustain any peace efforts. Accordingly, the crime of enforced disappearance against these workers demands urgent accountability measures and greater efforts to ensure their safety and enable them to carry out their duties free from threat or intimidation.

Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Southern Transitional Council Forces

The Southern Transitional Council (STC) is a political and military entity with a separatist agenda that emerged in the context of the Yemeni conflict. It was officially declared on 11 May 2017 under the leadership of Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, one of the prominent figures in the former “Southern Resistance.”⁸³ From its inception, the Council openly adopted a separatist project seeking to restore what was formerly known as the “State of the South,” capitalizing on the country’s institutional fragmentation and security vacuum, and receiving direct and extensive political, military, and financial support from the United Arab Emirates.

The role of the STC has not been limited to political activities; it has also sought to establish

83 Southern Transitional Council, Official Page - About the Council, Official Website of the Southern Transitional Council, Available at <https://www.stcaden.com/pages/29>.

a parallel security structure through the creation of armed military formations such as the Security Belt Forces and the Elite Forces. The deployment of these forces gradually expanded to cover a number of southern governorates, including Aden, Lahj, Al-Dhale', Abyan, Shabwah, Hadhramout, and Socotra, where they imposed effective control on the ground.

Since the Council's emergence as a major actor on the ground, a systematic pattern of violations—particularly enforced disappearances—has been documented, perpetrated by its security formations in the absence of any legal or institutional oversight. These forces have established unofficial detention facilities not subject to any judicial authority, where individuals are held incommunicado, for indefinite periods, without clear charges or legal procedures ensuring the right to defense or a fair trial.

Since the STC's declaration in May 2017, Mwatana for Human Rights has documented 387 incidents of enforced disappearance affecting 630 victims in areas under the Council's control and that of its security formations. Given that the Council exercises de facto authority over this territory, all enforced disappearance crimes committed after its establishment fall under its direct legal responsibility—whether carried out by its official forces or by allied units supported by the United Arab Emirates.

Under international law, enforced disappearance is a crime in its own right and may amount to a crime against humanity if committed systematically and on a widespread scale—a description that applies to the recurring pattern of incidents attributed to the STC in the southern governorates.

Ahmed Numeiri Ibrahim Abdu Ali Al-Zubaidi – 19 years old (Aden)

On Sunday, 6 February 2021, at approximately 7:00 p.m., Security Belt Forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council in the Al-Mansoura district of Aden governorate, specifically in the Enma residential city, detained Ahmed Numeiri Ibrahim Abdu Ali Al-Zubaidi on charges of possessing and trafficking drugs, stealing cars, and selling publicly owned residential land. He was taken to an undisclosed location, and his fate remains unknown at the time of writing this report.

Mwatana for Human Rights was able to meet with the victim's father, Numeiri Ibrahim (56 years old), and verify the circumstances of his son Ahmed's enforced disappearance. Numeiri recounts:

"After my son Ahmed was detained and disappeared, we went to the central prison in Aden, then to Bir Ahmed prison and the Coalition prison, but we could not find him. My brother, Abdu Ibrahim, accompanied me and took on the task of following up on the search in Aden,

as I suffer from a slipped disc in my spine and cannot travel. His mother has passed away, and we have no one to help us except my brother Abdu, who is still searching for him there.”⁸⁴

The father continues:

“About a month ago (from the date of the interview), a young man came asking about the Al-Zubaidi family. He was directed to our house and said he had been detained with my son Ahmed in one of the prisons in Lahj governorate—he could not remember the exact name of the prison—and that Ahmed had asked him, upon his release, to inform us of his whereabouts. However, the young man fell gravely ill due to the torture and fear he experienced and was transferred to the Al-Jumhuriya General Hospital in Aden. We are still in contact with him, but his health condition prevents him from giving us precise details. Once he recovers fully, we will visit him to learn the name of the prison and any lead that could help us find Ahmed in Lahj’s prisons.”⁸⁵

Mwatana’s legal support team conducted a series of field visits and follow-up calls with the Lahj Security Directorate, Al-Habilayn Security Directorate, the governorate’s Human Rights Office, the Prosecution of Investigations and Prisons, as well as officers in military intelligence. Despite checking official and unofficial prisons and repeatedly inquiring with the relevant authorities, all denied detaining Ahmed Numeiri or having any knowledge of his fate, leaving his family and the organization’s team without answers to this day.⁸⁶

Ahmed Saleh Maseeb Abdullah – 45 years old – Worker (Aden)

On Wednesday, 20 July 2022, at around 3:00 a.m., military forces under the command of the Fifth Support and Reinforcement Brigade, affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council, detained Ahmed Saleh Maseeb Abdullah from his home in Al-Saylah area, Sheikh Othman district, Aden governorate. The forces raided and searched the victim’s home, accusing him of involvement in the assassination of Major General Thabet Jawas. The victim remains forcibly disappeared to this day.

In an interview with Mwatana for Human Rights about the incident, the victim’s wife (56-year-old) stated:

“A force from the Fifth Support and Reinforcement Brigade stormed our home in Al-Saylah neighborhood, Sheikh Othman district, without permission or regard for the sanctity of the

84 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim’s father on December 7, 2021.

85 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim’s father on December 7, 2021.

86 From the updates of the Legal Support Unit team at Mwatana.

house, causing panic among the women and children. They first raided the home of my husband's second wife, searched it, and arrested my husband. Then they came to my house next door and detained two of my sons: Ayman (20 years old) and Saleh (17 years old)."⁸⁷

She continued:

"A man called 'Nabeel' (a pseudonym) from the Security Belt – Sheikh Othman sector, arrived, and an argument broke out between him and the force, with weapons being brandished. He insisted that the area was under his sector's control and that the raid had been conducted without coordination. Nabeel managed to secure the release of my two sons, while the force took my husband to an undisclosed location."

She added:

"A few days later, I heard that my husband was being held at the Fifth Brigade prison in Lahj governorate. I went there, but the officials denied his presence. Later, I heard he had been transferred to Security Belt prisons in Sheikh Othman and then Khor Maksar, and afterward to the Counterterrorism prison in Aden. Each time I visited, they denied holding him. I did not take legal action because I am illiterate and unfamiliar with legal procedures. My husband remains forcibly disappeared to this day."⁸⁸

Mwatana's legal support team is providing legal assistance to the victim and visited the Security Directorate, the Human Rights Office, the Criminal Investigation Department in Al-Habilayn, Al-Rabat Security Directorate, and the Prosecution of Investigations and Prisons in Lahj, and also contacted individuals in military intelligence. Despite registering Ahmed Maseeb's details with each entity and receiving assurances from officials that they would investigate in both official and unofficial prisons, all authorities denied his detention or having knowledge of his whereabouts, and his fate remains unknown.⁸⁹

Ahmad Saleh Ali Al-Jabli (46 years old, farmer) and his wife, Kulthoum Ahmad Mohammed Yahya (40 years old, housewife) – Abyan

"While his two sons became homeless and now survive only by collecting garbage scraps to earn their daily bread."

On Saturday, January 1, 2022, at around 8:00 p.m., forces from the "Security Belt" affiliated

87 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's wife, on October 4, 2022.

88 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's wife, on October 4, 2022.

89 From the updates of the Legal Support Unit at Mwatana.

with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) raided the home of Ahmad Saleh Ali Al-Jabli (46 years old) in the village of Al-Diou, Khanfar District – Abyan Governorate, and detained him along with his wife, Kulthoum Ahmad Mohammed Yahya (40 years old), on charges of involvement in the bombing of the motorcade of Major General Thabet Jawas. The couple was taken to an undisclosed location, and their fate remains unknown as of the preparation of this report.

In an interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's sister, she said:

"My brother Ahmad is a peaceful man with no power or influence. He worked on a banana farm, was married, had three children, and was the sole breadwinner for his family."⁹⁰

She added:

"They stormed the house and forcibly pulled my brother away from his children and wife, placing him on a military pickup. Before the vehicle moved, his wife, Kulthoum, shouted in their faces, fearlessly cursing their corruption—so they arrested her as well and took her away by force. Since that day, we have known nothing about them."⁹¹

She continued:

"It's been about two and a half years, and we haven't lost hope of searching for them and asking about them—just to know whether they are alive or not."⁹²

She concluded:

"My brother's children's lives were destroyed after his disappearance; his daughter was forcibly married off by insistence of her uncles, while his two sons became homeless and now survive only by collecting garbage scraps to earn their daily bread."⁹³

The legal support team at Mwatana intensified efforts to uncover the fate of Ahmad Al-Jabli and Kulthoum Ahmad Mohammed, moving between the Criminal Investigation Department in Zinjibar, the Security Belt command, and the Abyan Public Security Directorate, as well as engaging directly with senior security officials. All continued to deny having any information or that the couple was in official custody, offering only vague promises to inform the team if new developments arose. To date, the fate of both remains unknown.⁹⁴

90 An interview postponed by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's sister, on June 16, 2023.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 From the follow-up of the Legal Support Unit team at Mwatana.

Ezzat Abdulrahim Mohammed Abdulrahman
(30 years old, taxi driver) – Aden



"I just wish to know his fate."

On Saturday, March 10, 2018, at around 6:00 a.m., armed forces in military vehicles and uniforms, affiliated with the Counter-Terrorism Forces of the Southern Transitional Council, raided the home of the victim, Ezzat Abdulrahim Mohammed Abdulrahman (30 years old, taxi driver), located in the Kubuta area of Mansoura District, Aden, and took him to an undisclosed location. His fate remains unknown at the time of writing this report.

In a filmed interview for Mwatana's documentary "Unknown Fate", the victim's father said:

"The security forces stormed my son's home and the homes of several of his colleagues, taking them all to Al-Jalaa Prison (run by the Support and Reinforcement Forces under the STC's control). After some time, his colleagues were transferred to Bir Ahmed Prison, while my son's fate has remained unknown from March 10 until today."⁹⁵

Breaking down in tears, he continued:

"I'm exhausted from thinking and worrying—wondering if my son is alive or not. Sometimes, I can't sleep at night from thinking about him."⁹⁶

He added:

"Every time I see his colleagues or attend their court sessions and my son is absent, I come home crushed, unable to eat, and incapable of telling his mother what happened."

He concluded:

"I just wish to know his fate."⁹⁷

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through a network of lawyers across different regions of Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim's family, the team follows up on reports and

⁹⁵ Mwatana for Human Rights, "The Unknown Fate" documentary film: <https://www.mwatana.org/videos-en/the-unknown-fate>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

contacts security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim's fate and seek justice, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.⁹⁸

Abdullah Ali Ali Al-Hayyi (35 years old, Qat seller) – Aden

"I saw my husband tied up and covered in blood... then he disappeared."

On October 16, 2020, at around 4:00 a.m., an armed military force of about 15 members, wearing military uniforms and traveling in two military vehicles and a black car belonging to Al-Basateen Police Station (affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council), detained Abdullah Ali Al-Hayyi (35 years old, qat seller) from his home in the city of Enma, Al-Buraiqa District, Aden Governorate. He and his wife were taken to Al-Basateen Police Station and accused of carrying out bombings in various areas of Aden and committing acts of sabotage in favor of the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group.

At Al-Basateen Police Station, the victim was tortured—his hands were bound while one person twisted his fingers, another slapped his face with a shoe, and a third inserted a stick into his anus, causing bleeding. Since that time, the victim has been forcibly disappeared. Subsequent attempts by his family to locate him and learn his fate were met with denials from all security and military bodies, and his fate remains unknown at the time of writing this report.

On the night of Abdullah Al-Hayyi's arrest, his wife was staying at the home of one of his friends—who had been detained earlier—offering support to his family. That same night, military forces raided the friend's home where she was staying, detained her, and took her along to Abdullah's residence. They then raided his home and took both him and his wife to Al-Basateen Police Station. There, Abdullah was tortured, and his wife was brought into the room where he was being abused. They demanded he confess to possessing a weapon in order to spare his wife. Describing the scene, she said:

"They brought me into the room where they were torturing my husband. I saw him bound hand and foot, covered in blood, his face and eyes swollen. One of them told my husband that his detained friend had confessed to everything to protect his wife, and that he should confess as well. One was twisting my husband's fingers, another was slapping his face with a shoe, demanding a confession, and a third was inserting a stick into my husband's anus! My husband was screaming and bleeding from his anus. But he refused to confess to anything. They then asked me to admit that my husband had a weapon. I told them that he had bought

98 From the follow-up of the Legal Support Unit in Mwatana.

a weapon six months earlier, taken it to his home village, and given it to his brothers to sell to pay off a debt.”⁹⁹

The wife was later released and returned home. Abdullah Al-Hayyi subsequently disappeared, and all police stations and security agencies denied having him in custody. He remains forcibly disappeared to this day.

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through a network of lawyers across various regions of Yemen. After documenting all the details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim’s family, the team follows up on reports and contacts security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim’s fate and seek justice, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.¹⁰⁰

Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Forces of the Internationally Recognized Government

Since the outbreak of the 2011 revolution in Yemen, President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi assumed power in February 2012 through an election in which he was the sole candidate, supported by the GCC and international backing, marking the start of a transitional phase led by a government enjoying international recognition. The actual influence of the internationally recognized government began to decline after the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group took control of Sana’a in September 2014.

Starting in March 2015, with the entry of the Saudi/UAE-led coalition, a dual detention pattern emerged: there were official camps affiliated with government brigades and others run by coalition officers or joint units. In this environment, denial became a daily practice to evade responsibility and accountability for detainees. In May 2017, the announcement of the Southern Transitional Council and the defection of the “Security Belt” forces from the authority of the internationally recognized government marked a turning point; however, violations committed before that date remain legally attributable to the internationally recognized government, as those units were still operating officially under its command at the time.

On April 7, 2022, President Hadi transferred his powers to the Presidential Leadership Council headed by Rashad Al-Alimi. However, this change did not dismantle the existing

99 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim’s wife, on November 9, 2020.

100 From the follow-up of the Legal Support Unit at Mwatana.

Suspended Fates

security structure; secret detention centers continued to operate, and enforced disappearance remained linked to the internationally recognized government, despite its geographic control having shrunk to scattered areas in Marib, Hadhramout, Al-Mahra, parts of Taiz Governorate, and limited areas in both Al-Bayda and Al-Jawf.

From 2014 to July 2025, Mwatana for Human Rights documented at least 351 incidents of enforced disappearance affecting 449 victims in areas under the control of the internationally recognized government.

**Ihab Faisal Ali Nasr Radman –
24 years old – Worker (Aden)**



In the early hours of Wednesday, November 16, 2016, a military force of about 60 soldiers in army uniforms, traveling in roughly ten vehicles affiliated with the “Transport Brigade” of the internationally recognized government, raided the Al-Dar Hotel in Dar Saad District, Aden Governorate. During the raid, Ihab Faisal Radman (24, worker) was detained and taken to the brigade’s camp in Dar Saad, where he was beaten on

his hands and legs and burned in various parts of his body, including his testicles. His family was allowed to visit him two months after his arrest. He was later transferred from the Dar Saad prison to an undisclosed location, and security authorities subsequently denied holding him. His fate remains unknown as of the date of this report.

His father, Faisal, told Mwatana for Human Rights in an interview:

“The Dar Saad camp—where my son was first held—was under the internationally recognized government. After clashes broke out between it and Southern Transitional Council forces, and fearing the camp might be bombed, they took my son out of his cell and placed him inside a tank stationed near the camp, hoping it would be targeted in an airstrike so he would be killed and they could be rid of him. When neither the tank nor the camp was bombed, they moved him to an unknown location.”¹⁰¹

He added:

“We searched for my son in all official and unofficial prisons, but all authorities denied

101 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim’s father on August 10, 2022.

holding him. Once, we went to the Director of Criminal Investigation in the governorate, who immediately called the Dar Saad District Security Department. The district's investigations officer confirmed that Ihab was in their custody, so the director told him: 'Ihab's family will come and cover the transportation and escort costs, and you must hand him over to the Criminal Investigation Department in the governorate today.' He ended the call, but seconds later the same officer called back to retract his statement, claiming he had mistaken the name and that the detainee was not Ihab.

We submitted a petition to the former Security Director of the governorate, Shalal Ali Shaye, who ordered the Transport Brigade to disclose my son's fate, but the order was never carried out. We then filed a complaint with the former Attorney General, who referred it to the Head of the Court of Appeals Prosecution, who in turn referred it to the Military Prosecution—yet to this day, the latter has taken no action.”¹⁰²

In the “Ramadan with Their Families 2024” campaign conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights, the victim's father wrote:

“Only a few days remain before Ramadan, and its second day marks the third anniversary of your mother's passing. She thought of nothing but you, and her only hope was to see you, hold you to her chest, and breathe in your scent. Imagine—she would call your older brother by your name, and that would make us all cry. Your mother suffered greatly, but she could not endure after your enforced disappearance; she departed to her Creator. As for me, my youngest, I will never forget you; I will keep pursuing your captors wherever and whenever I can until God takes me. We still remember your mischievous gestures and childlike outbursts that soothed our hearts and eased the pain of your absence.”¹⁰³

On March 5, 2023, the Dar Saad police contacted Ihab's father and asked him to come and identify his son's body among the corpses the police had found buried in the yard of the Transport Brigade commander. The victim's father went to the site to check whether his son's body was among them. After examining the bodies, he informed the police that none of them were Ihab's.

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across various parts of Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim's family, the team continues to follow up on complaints and correspond with security and judicial authorities on the family's behalf, seeking to uncover the victim's fate and achieve justice for him, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

**Walid Ali Saif Ali Ahmed Al-Aswad –
28 years old – Driver (Aden)**



On 11 October 2015, at around six in the morning, Walid Ali Saif Al-Aswad (28 years old, driver, unmarried) was forcibly disappeared after leaving his home en route to Aden Governorate. Since that day, his family has been unable to contact him or learn his whereabouts and fate. Later, his car appeared on the Al-Hadath TV channel in the possession of armed military forces affiliated with the internationally recognized government. The family searched for him in prisons and police stations in Aden to no avail.

In an on-camera interview with the victim's mother, featured in a Mwatana for Human Rights documentary titled *The Unknown Fate*, she said:

"They say a mother's heart is her guide, and my heart tells me my son is still alive."¹⁰⁴

She added:

"Every day, I imagine his return and having him among us."¹⁰⁵

The victim's father told Mwatana for Human Rights:

"My son Walid owned a Hilux vehicle, license plate number 11958/7, which he used to transport goods, passengers, and other items. It was his sole source of income—and ours as a family. He had bought it with the money he had saved over years of work, from his teenage years into early adulthood."¹⁰⁶

He added, "Walid was hardworking and determined; he saved enough from working on his Hilux to fulfill his dream of enrolling in university. But the outbreak of the war, and the crises that came with it—especially the shortage of fuel derivatives—disrupted his plans, as it did for many ordinary Yemenis. He used to leave at dawn and return at night after a long day transporting goods with his only means of livelihood. At 6:00 a.m. on 11 October 2015, he left our home in the village of Al-Qur'ama, Al-Ta'iziyah District, Taiz Governorate, heading to Aden to purchase diesel to fill his vehicle and sell the surplus amid the severe fuel crisis at the time.

104 An on-camera interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's mother, "The Unknown Fate" documentary film: <https://www.mwatana.org/videos/unknownfate>.

105 Ibid.

106 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's father on September 4, 2023.

I had already gone to the farm and did not say goodbye; from that day on, he never returned.”¹⁰⁷

“At around 12:15 p.m., I returned home and asked one of Walid’s brothers to call him, as I was starting to feel uneasy. His phone was switched off. His brother tried repeatedly with no success. My fear grew, but I kept it to myself. As the time for his return approached, his mother asked why he was late. I reassured her, saying he might be busy with friends and would be back soon. The hours dragged on, and at 11:30 p.m., I tried calling again; the phone was still off. I became certain something had happened to him. I anxiously contacted his friends after getting their numbers from his brother, but they all confirmed they had not seen him in a while. We spent that night making calls from time to time, but there was no answer.”

“At dawn the next day, I filed a report with the local security department about Walid’s disappearance the night before, and then began an exhausting search everywhere. Days turned into months, and then years—and Walid has never returned.”¹⁰⁸

He continued:

“Months after Walid’s disappearance, we saw his vehicle on a television channel in the possession of a military brigade in Aden Governorate, during an interview with a member of that brigade. We could not identify which force they belonged to, only that they were from Aden and the filming took place in the same governorate. Since then, we have tried from time to time to trace his whereabouts, relying on acquaintances in Aden to search for him in prisons and detention centers, but to no avail.”¹⁰⁹

He concluded, “Since my son’s disappearance, we have been living under severe psychological and economic strain; his mother is devastated, and her condition worsens day by day.”

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across various parts of Yemen. After documenting all the details of the incident and obtaining the informed consent of the victim’s family, the team follows up on reports and communicates with security and judicial authorities on the family’s behalf, in an effort to uncover the victim’s fate and achieve justice for him, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

It should be noted that at the time of the victim’s enforced disappearance in 2015, Aden Governorate was under the effective control of the internationally recognized government.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

Akram Mohammed Hussein Da'er Al-Bukhaiti – 35 years old – Employee (Ma'rib)

On Wednesday, October 5, 2022, personnel affiliated with the Political Security Organization (PSO) in Ma'rib Governorate—stationed at one of the governorate's entrances, under the authority of the internationally recognized Yemeni government, and associated with the Yemeni Congregation for Reform Party ("Islah")—stopped Akram Mohammed Hussein Da'er Al-Bukhaiti (35 years old, married, employee). He was taken to the PSO building in Ma'rib on accusations of belonging to the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, on the grounds of his family name "Al-Bukhaiti," questioning his kinship with the Governor of Dhamar, and suspecting that his entry into Ma'rib was for the purpose of espionage. After his arrest, Akram was able to contact his family four times, each call lasting no more than one minute. In a final call made by his wife to the PSO director in Ma'rib, the official denied having Akram in custody. His whereabouts have remained unknown to his family from the second half of 2024 until the preparation of this report.

In an interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights on July 1, 2024, the victim's wife stated:

"Akram works as a civilian employee in the Student Affairs Department at Sana'a University. Our situation was stable until salary payments stopped, and our conditions deteriorated. Akram tried repeatedly to find alternative work to cover the family's expenses, but he could not find a suitable opportunity, as he only knew administrative work within the university. For eight years, we have been struggling to meet the needs of our four children in the ongoing absence of salaries."¹¹⁰

She continued:

"On the morning of Wednesday, October 5, 2022, Akram and a colleague from the university traveled to Ma'rib Governorate after his friend told him about a job opportunity there. As soon as they reached the first checkpoint at the entrance to the governorate, they were stopped by PSO personnel, accused of belonging to the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, and told that Akram was from the Al-Bukhaiti family. The two were transferred to the PSO building in Ma'rib city. From that night on, all contact with Akram ceased. Two months passed without us knowing his whereabouts despite repeatedly asking his friends. Later, his friend was released and informed an acquaintance of what had happened; that acquaintance then called me and recounted the details of their arrest."¹¹¹

110 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim's wife on July 1, 2024.

111 Ibid.

She added:

"I contacted my husband's friend, who had been detained with him at the PSO and later released. I asked about Akram's condition, and he assured me that he was fine and that no investigation had been conducted with him during the two months, but that the detention conditions were harsh. They were kept in a dark basement resembling a hangar, and the available drinking water was not clean, brought from the bathrooms and provided only once every two days. At the end of the call, he gave me the phone number of the PSO director in Ma'rib and nothing more."¹¹²

She went on:

"After that, I called the PSO prison director in Ma'rib and told him I wanted to hear my husband's voice. He said he would try, then explained that Akram was detained on suspicion that, like his brother, he worked with the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, and that he had entered Ma'rib for espionage purposes. I assured him that my husband was a peaceful civilian who came to Ma'rib only to seek a livelihood. He replied that his release was possible if I came to Ma'rib in person and provided a 'guarantee,' without specifying what that guarantee entailed.

I asked Akram's father and brothers to travel to collect him and sign the guarantee, but they refused, fearing it was a trap that would lead to their arrest, as entering Ma'rib was risky for anyone with the Al-Bukhaiti surname. As for me, my family and acquaintances would not allow me to travel alone for the same reason, fearing that any of us might be detained solely because of our family name. Thus, Akram remained in detention, and we were unable to complete the guarantee procedures that the PSO director had never defined."¹¹³

She continued:

"About a month after speaking with the PSO director, I received a one-minute call from Akram. He reassured me that he was fine and asked me to take care of the children. Later, he contacted me two more times in 2023, each call lasting less than a minute. The last time I heard his voice was seven months before this interview.

I contacted the PSO director again, requesting that Akram be allowed to call me once more, but he refused and, for the first time, denied that Akram was in their custody. I knocked on every possible door and followed up on his case with various authorities, but to no avail."¹¹⁴

She concluded:

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

"I am a mother to three girls and one boy, the youngest only five years old, all deprived of their father for no fault of their own."¹¹⁵

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through a network of lawyers across various parts of Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and obtaining the informed consent of the victim's family, the team follows up on complaints and addresses security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim's fate and secure justice for him, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

Ahmed Mohammed Ahmed Ali Sabah – 55 years old (Ma'rib)

On Saturday, February 15, 2020, at around 10:00 a.m., military forces affiliated with the internationally recognized government, stationed at the "Al-Falaj checkpoint," detained Ahmed Mohammed Ahmed Ali Sabah and took him to an undisclosed location. His fate remains unknown at the time of writing this report.

The victim's wife told Mwatana for Human Rights in an interview:

"My husband and I had left Yemen so I could receive treatment, as I was diagnosed with breast cancer. On our way back from the trip, after five months of treatment and undergoing a mastectomy in Iran, we arrived at the Al-Falaj checkpoint in Ma'rib. This place is devoid of all human values and social norms. They treated us in an inhumane manner and searched both my husband, his companion, and me in a brutal way. Even my cancer medication was reduced to just a few capsules, rendering it useless and worthless.

They made my husband and his companion get out of the car and searched it thoroughly. They found bracelets we had bought from Iran inscribed with the names of Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's family). After that, they took my husband for questioning, which continued from dawn until sunrise, in a manner more like the methods of gangs and highway robbers. My husband told them, 'My wife is sick, and we are merely passing through. Leave us alone; we have done nothing wrong.' But they kept mocking us because we had come from Iran and decided to detain him and his companion, even swearing they would not let them return with us.

I got out of the car and clung to my husband with all my strength. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. They tried to pull him from my grasp, saying, 'Don't try to fool us with these tricks; we swear, even if you die right now, we will still take him.' They had no regard for my weakness or helplessness. My husband shouted, 'Please, don't humiliate me further; I can't

115 Ibid.

bear to see them hurt you. Go back to the car and leave — the children are waiting for you.’ I left without him, with my youngest daughter beside me.

We are Twelver Shia. We have a charity organization supported by the State of Kuwait, and we have no affiliation with any party or with the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group. My husband’s only weapon is a food basket he gives to the needy. He committed no crime; he neither stole nor killed. We were merely passing through. We do not know what offense he supposedly committed to be separated from his children and family.”¹¹⁶

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through a network of lawyers across various parts of Yemen. After documenting all the details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim’s family, the team follows up on reports and communicates with security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim’s fate and achieve justice for him, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

**Mustafa Hussein Mohammed Hassan Al-Mutawakkil,
61 years old, university professor (Ma’rib)**



On April 27, 2017, while returning from Sayun after participating in a conference in Morocco, Dr. Mustafa Al-Mutawakkil was stopped by soldiers affiliated with the internationally recognized government and allied formations from the Yemeni Congregation for Reform party (Islah) at the Al-Falaj checkpoint in Ma’rib. They boarded the bus and took him to an undisclosed location. Since then, his family has been denied any visits or contact with him, and his fate remains unknown at the time of writing this report.

Dr. Al-Mutawakkil’s daughter told Mwatana for Human Rights in an interview:

“My father was appointed Chairman of the General Investment Authority in November 2016. Based on this position, he received an invitation from the Arab Investment and Export Credit Guarantee Corporation in the Kingdom of Morocco on February 27, 2017, for a two-day event on April 18–19, 2017. He traveled to Egypt on April 14, 2017, to obtain the visa, attended the conference, and then returned to Egypt accompanied by a colleague from Aden

116 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim’s wife on June 18, 2020.

Governorate. The invitation for my father came from Sana'a, and his colleague's from Aden, as they were representing the General Investment Authority of the Republic of Yemen.

My father arrived in Sayun on April 26, 2017, stayed one night, then booked a ticket to return to Sana'a on April 27, 2017. The bus departed at 7:00 a.m., and at around 7:45 a.m., he called our home landline. The housekeeper answered, and he told her he was with the internationally recognized government, who 'seemed to be nice people.' He also called his second wife and told her he was in Ma'rib, asking her not to worry. According to her, he seemed in a hurry during the call.

That was the last time we heard his voice or knew his whereabouts. He was arrested on Thursday, April 27, 2017, at the Al-Falaj checkpoint in Ma'rib Governorate. A passenger who was with my father on the bus told us that soldiers at the checkpoint called him off the bus, saying there was a report against him from the Harib Al-Qaramish area. My father told the man he wanted him to take his bag to Sana'a and deliver it to us, so the man didn't get off with him.

We hid the news of my father's arrest from my mother for a day, fearing for her health, before we were forced to tell her. We contacted tribal sheikhs to mediate for his release. On Saturday, April 29, 2017, my mother contacted the Deputy Governor of Ma'rib and informed him of my father's arrest. He told her to send him the name and asked who would receive my father so that he wouldn't be arrested again at the Al-Falaj checkpoint. Afterwards, he stopped responding to her calls.

We continued reaching out to sheikhs in Ma'rib for mediation, but the authorities responsible for my father's arrest intimidated those who intervened, telling them my father was a 'senior Houthi' who had confessed, that he belonged to an arms-smuggling network, had entered from Oman illegally, and was the second-in-command after Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi. My mother decided to travel to Ma'rib with a team of my father's university colleagues and two lawyers to follow up with local officials. Despite their efforts, she was neither able to visit him nor secure his release.

Ten days after my father's arrest — before my mother traveled to Ma'rib — when she contacted officials there, they told her he had 'nothing against him' and that he would be released once questioning was complete, calling the arrest a 'mistake.' On the tenth night, we received word that there was an order for his release the next morning. That very night, however, a fierce media campaign was launched against releasing my father, accusing him and warning that if he were freed, officials with the internationally recognized government would be betraying the 'martyrs of the resistance.'

We kept coordinating with the sheikhs on one hand, and on the other, reached out to

international organizations to ensure my father's safety and to counter this incitement campaign. To this day, we have not been able to speak with him or visit him; he has not contacted us, and we do not know where he is."¹¹⁷

In a recorded interview with the victim's wife, Ilham Al-Mutawakkil (before her death), featured in Mwatana's documentary "The Unknown Fate", she said:

"The disappearance of Dr. Mustafa Al-Mutawakkil was extremely difficult; it hurt us deeply. Dr. Mustafa is a peaceful civilian figure. He was detained at the Al-Falaj checkpoint on April 27, 2017, because of his family name. The name 'Al-Mutawakkil' was considered a prized catch for them — as long as he was an Al-Mutawakkil, he must be a Houthi, that is, a member of the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group."

On May 15, 2017, his wife, Professor Ilham Al-Mutawakkil, traveled to Ma'rib with a legal team to assert her legal right to visit him and check on his wellbeing. Accompanying her were also three members of the Faculty Union at Sana'a University, including its chairman, in solidarity with their colleague.

Ilham said:

"I never imagined such poor treatment from some officials in Ma'rib. They treated me as though I were Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi himself, while I was nothing more than a grieving wife whose life partner had disappeared, barred from any contact with him."

Later, according to his wife, the UN Sanctions Committee informed the family — after they had reported the case — that they had contacted the authorities in Ma'rib, who responded by saying that Dr. Mustafa Al-Mutawakkil had been handed over to Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Al-Mutawakkil has three daughters and two sons. One of his sons died in Malaysia due to medical malpractice following a car accident. His death occurred months after his father's enforced disappearance, during which, according to the family, Al-Hussein spent his final days pining for his father. One of the daughters said:

"It was a disastrous year for us — first the enforced disappearance of our father, then the painful loss of our brother."

She added:

"We had to smuggle his body through Oman for fear it would be detained in Ma'rib like what happened with our father."

Dr. Mustafa Al-Mutawakkil's wife passed away on March 26, 2023, holding hope for his return.

117 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's son on September 24, 2017.

Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Saudi/UAE-led Coalition Forces

Since the start of the Saudi/UAE-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen on 26 March 2015, under the name "Operation Decisive Storm," forces affiliated with this coalition, along with allied local forces, have been linked to a series of serious human rights violations—foremost among them enforced disappearances.

The map of territorial control by coalition forces and their local units was drawn along shifting lines, which, since 2015, have followed a gradual trajectory of entrenchment in the south and west. Following the recapture of Aden in late July 2015, UAE-backed Security Belt units extended their influence across Aden's neighborhoods and later into Lahj and Abyan, while the Shabwani Elite Forces emerged in Shabwa. The UAE maintained a major base in Al-Buraiqa and established training sites in Al-Rayyan (Hadhramout) and Al-Ghaydah (Al-Mahrah).

The year 2017 marked a political and military turning point, as the Southern Transitional Council (STC) declared itself the representative of the south and adopted Aden as its de facto capital. From that moment, the city—along with Al-Dhale' and large parts of Lahj—became a clear sphere of influence for the Southern Transitional Council, while the coalition continued to operate its seaports and airports along the southern coast.

During 2018 and 2019, UAE support pushed the Joint Forces led by Tareq Saleh to advance westward along the coast from Mokha to Al-Khokha, bringing the western coastline under the coalition's military grip through these forces. Meanwhile, the STC maintained its hold over the southern governorates with its own weapons, while Saudi Arabia focused its military presence eastward around Seiyun, Marib, and Al-Mahrah. By 2020, STC control over Aden, Al-Dhale', and large parts of Abyan and Shabwah had become entrenched.

From 2021 to the present, the boundaries of control have remained largely unchanged: the coalition retains aerial and naval authority in Aden, Mokha, Al-Riyan, and Al-Ghaydah; the STC administers most of the south, extending to Socotra; and the Joint Forces remain stationed along the coastal strip between Taiz and Al-Hudaydah.

Between 2015 and July 2025, Mwatana for Human Rights documented at least 65 incidents of enforced disappearance affecting 91 victims in areas under the control of the Saudi/UAE-led coalition.

A particularly alarming aspect of these violations is that many families have, for years, been unable to learn the fate or whereabouts of their relatives or the charges against them.

Instead, they have faced denial, obfuscation, and delays from those in control—whether coalition representatives or affiliated Yemeni forces—causing severe psychological harm and prolonged denial of justice and redress.

Ahmed Fayeze Salem Bayamin – 22 years old – Student (Hadhramout – Mukalla)

On 9 May 2019, at around 7:00 p.m., an armed group of three masked men in a “Hilux” vehicle belonging to the Hadhrami Elite Forces stationed at Quartz Camp (affiliated with the Saudi/UAE-led coalition) detained Ahmed Fayeze Salem Bayamin (22, single, student) from the main street in front of the Ali bin Abi Talib Mosque, Ghayl Bawazir District, Hadhramout Governorate (Mukalla), immediately after he left Maghrib prayer. He was handcuffed and taken first to Quartz Camp prison, and then transferred to Al-Riyan Airport—a facility that later became an unofficial detention center under coalition control—without any disclosure of his fate as of the writing of this report.

Following his son’s detention, Ahmed’s father contacted the commander of Quartz Camp, who told him that the arrest was carried out on orders from Emirati commanders at Al-Riyan Airport, to whom Ahmed had been transferred, without knowing the reason. The father later attempted to reach an Emirati officer to inquire about the case, and after 15 days of enforced disappearance, the officer claimed Ahmed had already been released earlier and that he had no knowledge of his whereabouts.¹¹⁸

The father then returned to the Quartz Camp commander, with tribal mediation, and the commander swore that he had handed Ahmed over at Al-Riyan Airport and did not know what happened after that.

Later, the father filed a complaint with the governor, who refused to receive or sign it unless the exact location of Ahmed was known, requesting instead a letter from the Quartz Camp commander confirming the incident. By that time, a new commander had been appointed, who denied that Ahmed was ever detained at the camp.¹¹⁹

The father searched for Ahmed in all police stations, at the Ghayl District Security Department, and at the Second Military Region Command, but all denied holding him or knowing his whereabouts. Ahmed remains forcibly disappeared to this day.

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across Yemen. After documenting all details of the incident and obtaining informed

118 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim’s father on November 3, 2020.

119 Ibid.

consent from the victim's family, the team is following up complaints and addressing security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, seeking to uncover the victim's fate and ensure justice—regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

Ahmed Saeed (pseudonym), 24, fisherman, and Omar Mohammed (pseudonym), 31, fisherman

On July 7, 2020, both Ahmed Saeed (pseudonym) (24 years old, fisherman, male, single) and Omar Mohammed (pseudonym) (31 years old, fisherman, male, married) disappeared during a fishing trip off the coast of Al Mahrah. Since then, their families have received no news of their whereabouts. A week after their disappearance, Omar's brother received a phone call from a fisherman in Al Mahrah, informing him that their boat had been found in the Al Hawf area of Al Mahrah. The relatives observed no signs of an accident, strong winds, or any mishap. The family reported the disappearance to the Criminal Investigation Department in Al Mahrah, but no meaningful action was taken. Both the Political Security and Military Intelligence in Al Mahrah denied having any knowledge of their whereabouts or fate.

Later, the owner of the boat — who had not been with the victims on the fishing trip — claimed that the fishermen had been detained on charges of smuggling qat into the Sultanate of Oman. Both Ahmed and Omar remain missing, and their fate has not been disclosed as of the writing of this report. It is worth noting that, at the time, effective control over Al Mahrah and its coastline was in the hands of the Saudi/UAE-led coalition.

Noah Baktheer (pseudonym), 19 years old, and Anis Abdu (pseudonym), 28 years old

On June 11, 2020, Noah Baktheer (pseudonym) and Anis Abdu (pseudonym) disappeared during a sea voyage from Hadhramaut to Socotra. Their families searched for them at the port of Al Mukalla, at the Coast Guard Command, and at the Maritime Affairs Department. The Governor of Hadhramaut refused to allow the family to enter Al Riyan Airport (which had been used as a detention facility during the conflict) to file a report of enforced disappearance.

Later, two months after the victims' enforced disappearance, a staff member at the Maritime Affairs Department secretly informed the families that the victims had been detained and advised them to follow up with the security authorities. These authorities, however, denied any knowledge of their whereabouts or fate.

Examples of Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Since the late 1980s, when Yemeni fighters returned from the mountains of Afghanistan and settled in villages between Saada, Marib, and Al Bayda, a new jihadist movement began to take shape—blending militant Salafism with mountain warfare tactics. It quickly found in Yemen's state fragility a fertile environment for expansion.¹²⁰

This movement announced itself dramatically on 12 October 2000, when a suicide boat bombed the American destroyer USS Cole in the port of Aden, killing 17 sailors and leaving a massive hole in the ship's hull.¹²¹

Following the 11 September attacks, the southern plateaus and valleys became the scene of U.S. drone raids, killing field commanders and forcing others to seek refuge in the mountains of Abyan, Shabwa, and Al Bayda. The group then entered a period of dormancy (2003–2008), during which it focused on reorganizing its ranks and spreading propaganda among tribal communities beyond state control.¹²²

In January 2009, the Yemen and Saudi branches of Al-Qaeda merged under the banner of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), unifying their media discourse and raising ambitions to conduct cross-border operations.

The 2011 uprising paved the way for a rare opportunity. In March 2011, AQAP fighters captured Jaar, and within weeks entered Zinjibar, declaring the “Islamic Emirate of Waqar,” which expanded to include Shuqrah and Al-Kawd, before government forces—backed by U.S. and Saudi support—recaptured these areas in June 2012, pushing the fighters into the mountains of Al-Mahfad, Lawdar, Al Bayda, and Shabwa.¹²³

With the collapse of southern government fronts in 2015, the group seized the city of Al Mukalla, the capital of Hadhramout, where it ran the port and government offices for nearly a year, imposing fees on ships.¹²⁴ In April 2016, UAE-backed Yemeni forces announced the liberation of Al Mukalla, although others described the event as more of a tactical withdrawal

120 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), “USS Cole Bombing,” Famous Cases Section, available at: <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing>.

121 Ibid.

122 International Crisis Group, Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base, Report No. 174, 2 February 2017: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base>

123 Ibid.

124 Al Jazeera. “Yemen: The Truth Behind al-Qaeda's Takeover of Mukalla.” 16 September 2015. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/9/16/yemen-the-truth-behind-al-qaedas-takeover-of-mukalla>

than a decisive offensive.¹²⁵

Since losing Al Mukalla, AQAP has shifted its strategy back to shadow warfare—mountain road ambushes, improvised explosive devices, and assassinations targeting security officers in Marib, Shabwa, and Al Bayda. By the end of 2025, AQAP held no open control over any city, yet it remained considered the most dangerous Al-Qaeda branch worldwide, maintaining active cells in the valleys of Bayhan, Qayfah, and Wadi Ubaidah.¹²⁶

Mwatana documented 12 cases of enforced disappearance in areas controlled by AQAP, particularly during the periods of the Abyan Emirate (2011–2012) and the Al Mukalla Emirate (2015–2016). Upon entering Zinjibar and Jaar, and later Al Mukalla, AQAP fighters detained civilians, employees, and officials, transferring them to undisclosed detention sites where they were kept in complete isolation from the outside world. When their families attempted to inquire about them, they were met with categorical denials from prison guards or AQAP officials. Following AQAP's withdrawal from these cities, detention records disappeared, and the new authorities in power disclaimed any knowledge of the fate of the disappeared.

Mwatana for Human Rights notes that its legal support services are limited to cases that can be pursued before recognized judicial or quasi-judicial bodies. Therefore, it does not provide direct legal assistance to victims of enforced disappearance detained by AQAP or any other irregular armed group lacking the status of a “de facto authority” that can be legally addressed. Such entities do not provide legitimate procedural channels through which legal aid can be offered, preventing Mwatana from representing victims before them or obtaining binding commitments from them. In such cases, the organization's role is confined to documentation and advocacy.

Asaad (pseudonym – 30 years old) – Abyan

“We no longer know whether he is alive or not”

On 15 May 2012, at around 11:00 a.m., an armed group known as Ansar al-Sharia, affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), abducted Asaad (male, 30, employee) from a public street in the town of Jaar, Khanfar District, Abyan Governorate, and took him to an undisclosed location.

125 Bayoumy, Yara; Browning, Noah; & Ghobari, Mohammed. “How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Has Made al Qaeda Stronger – and Richer.” Reuters Special Report, 8 April 2016. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>

126 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – Actor Profile.” Yemen Conflict Observatory, updated 2024. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/yemen-conflict-observatory/actor-profiles/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula/>

Despite the family's persistent attempts to reach him and determine his place of detention, the controlling authorities at the time denied his presence anywhere in Abyan Governorate. As control over the area shifted among the parties to the conflict in Yemen, and the governorate was liberated from Ansar al-Sharia by forces affiliated with the internationally recognized Yemeni government, the subsequent authorities likewise denied holding him in any detention facility in the governorate. Meanwhile, rumors began circulating that he had been transferred to the city of Rada'a in Al Bayda Governorate.¹²⁷

The victim's father told Mwatana for Human Rights in an interview:

"My son had a kind heart, but he would not remain silent in the face of injustice. He opposed Ansar al-Sharia and cursed them for the killings, looting, and destruction they committed in Abyan under the pretext that they represented the Islamic State and were God's caliphs on earth implementing His laws."

He added:

"They kidnapped my son, accusing him of spying for the Yemeni army. We searched for him immediately after his abduction, but we could not find him—they hid him. Weeks after Al-Qaeda left Abyan, we visited every prison in the district, but found no trace of him."

The victim's brother said:

"I went to Hadhramout looking for him, but to no avail. Later, we were told he had been transferred to Rada'a in Al Bayda Governorate. We have lost hope, and we no longer know whether he is alive or not."¹²⁸

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across Yemen. After documenting all the details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim's family, the team is pursuing complaints and addressing the relevant security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim's fate and seek justice, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

Salem (pseudonym – 38 years old – sheep seller)

"We have been worn out searching for my brother ..."

On 7 June 2012, an armed group known as Ansar al-Sharia, affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, detained Salem (male, 38, married) from his workplace as a sheep seller

127 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim's father on December 24, 2019.

128 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim's brother on December 24, 2019.

in the market of Jaar, Khanfar District, Abyan Governorate. He was later transferred to Al-Mahfad District in the same governorate.

Despite his family's tireless efforts to determine his whereabouts, the group denied any involvement in his detention, and his fate remains unknown to this day.

The victim's brother told Mwatana for Human Rights in an interview:

"We have been worn out searching for my brother. We met with influential figures in the state who told us that my brother is still alive and has not died as we feared, but that he is being held by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group. However, the Houthis themselves denied holding him."¹²⁹

Another brother of the victim added:

"At the end of 2011, specifically in October, the city of Jaar in Khanfar District fell into the hands of the gang of evil, Ansar al-Sharia. Some young men from the area, along with others we did not know, named the city 'Waqar' and declared it an emirate under what they called the caliphate. They would arrest, kill, or crucify anyone who opposed them or whom they suspected of being a spy."¹³⁰

He continued:

"There was a man named Abdul Latif al-Sayyid, who was one of Al-Qaeda's leaders. Later, he had a falling-out with them, defected, and became a commander in what is known as the 'Security Belt.' The group began pursuing him and announced a reward of seven million Yemeni riyals for anyone who killed him.

During that period, Salem's wife gave birth to a child whom they named Abdul Latif, and that is when our suffering began. The group abducted Salem in one of their vehicles—about a week before the Yemeni army entered the area."¹³¹

He concluded:

"They took him to Al-Mahfad District, and we immediately followed, but they denied holding him and said he was not there. My eldest brother went to search for him and follow up on the case, but they detained him as well. Shortly afterwards, they released him, but he returned home suffering from a heart attack and died immediately."¹³²

129 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim's brother on November 13, 2019.

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

Mwatana for Human Rights is providing legal support in this case through its network of lawyers across Yemen. After documenting all the details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim's family, the team is pursuing complaints and addressing the relevant security and judicial authorities on behalf of the family, in an effort to uncover the victim's fate and seek justice, regardless of the party responsible for the violation.

Afif (pseudonym – 34 years old – beggar) (Al Bayda)

On March 1, 2019, around midday, an armed group affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula abducted "Afif" (pseudonym – 34 years old – beggar) from inside a mosque in the Qayfa area, Rada'a District, Al Bayda Governorate. He was taken to an unknown location, and his fate remains unknown as of the date of this report.

Afif's elder brother recounts the details of this tragedy:

"My brother Afif was 31 years old at the time of his disappearance in 2019. We used to move between governorates surrounding Dhamar, such as Al Bayda and Ibb, in search of a livelihood. Since then, and until my brother's disappearance, I have not been able—psychologically—to leave Jahran District. I blame myself for neglecting my brother when he went into the mosque; had I been with him, perhaps what happened could have been prevented.

One of the most devastating consequences for our entire family was that when I returned from Qayfa (Rada'a District) after my brother's disappearance and informed my family, my mother suffered a stroke from which she still suffers to this day. My mental state also deteriorated drastically, to the point where I became unemployed and incapable of working."¹³³

The victim's brother continues:

"On March 1, 2019, both Al-Qaeda and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group were conducting sweeps in the Qayfa area of Rada'a District. We passed through that area that day, and my brother Afif went into the mosque to pray. I told him I would wait for him under a tree a short distance away to rest and escape the midday sun.

While waiting, I noticed several Al-Qaeda vehicles, and it appeared that their members were also praying inside the mosque. I never imagined they would take my brother—especially since he was a peaceful beggar—so I did not worry much about their presence.

I waited for half an hour, but he never came out. I went to look for him, but found no one—

133 An interview conducted by Mwatana with the victim's brother on May 6, 2024.

not my brother, nor the vehicles. I asked the owner of a nearby shop about them, and he told me the vehicles had left about fifteen minutes earlier. I had no idea where they went, so I went to the police station to find someone who could help search for my brother. After explaining the situation, they told me it was likely that Al-Qaeda members had taken him.

Unfortunately, I received no help; even those at the station simply said, 'You can leave your information—your name and phone number—and we will contact you if we find your brother.' I returned to Dhamar to my family, devastated and powerless. I waited more than 20 days after his disappearance, searching for him in many areas of Al Bayda, but without any result.

In early 2021, my brother appeared for about a minute on Al Masirah TV, run by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, and his name was mentioned as a prisoner among Al-Qaeda members—even though my brother never participated in any fighting; he was a beggar and a peaceful person.

After that, my sister and I went to Dhamar city to meet a man named 'Al-Mutawakkil'—we don't know his full name—to ask whether it might be possible for the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group to release my brother. Three years have passed since then without any progress. Still, seeing him alive revived our hope, although we do not place much trust in anyone intervening to help us and bring him back."¹³⁴

He adds:

"We are a marginalized group with no one to stand by us. When I share what happened to my brother with those who know about it and know that we are marginalized, they show no concern. They see us as people without rights and are indifferent to our suffering. Since returning to Dhamar, after what happened to my brother and my helplessness in the face of his disappearance, I have been taking sedatives prescribed by a psychiatrist. I feel powerless and hopeless. My mother has suffered from a stroke ever since."¹³⁵

Mansour (pseudonym – 35 years old – employee)

"He objected to their presence... and disappeared forever"

On 1 August 2011, at around 5:30 p.m., an armed group affiliated with Ansar al-Sharia, linked to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, detained Mansour (pseudonym – 35 years old – employee) from the town of Ja'ar, Khanfar District, Abyan Governorate. He was first taken to the Ja'ar Police Station in the same district, and then transferred to an unknown location. The

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

fate of the victim remains unknown as of the writing of this report.

In an interview with Mwatana for Human Rights, the victim's brother said:

"When Ansar al-Sharia stormed Abyan Governorate, they began by seizing control of the city of Ja'ar in Khanfar District with all the weapons they possessed. We found ourselves living under their control in the district, and they launched a campaign of detentions targeting members of the Central Security forces, in addition to carrying out assassinations of some officials in the governorate, completely turning the situation upside down."¹³⁶

He added:

"My brother Mansour openly opposed their presence. He would declare that they were in the wrong, a misguided faction, not on the right path. One day, he had a dispute with a group of them, and that same evening, at around 5:30 p.m., they came and took him to the Ja'ar Police Station. I followed them immediately to try to find out the reason for his arrest, but I couldn't find him. They had hidden him completely and transferred him to an unknown location. Since then, we have not heard anything about him."¹³⁷

136 An interview conducted by Mwatana for Human Rights with the victim's brother on November 13, 2019.

137 Ibid.

Chapter Four

Mwatana for Human Rights' Efforts in Addressing Enforced Disappearance Crimes in Yemen

Documentation

As part of its efforts to build a national memory, Mwatana works to document enforced disappearance crimes. From the outbreak of the conflict in Yemen in September 2014 through the end of July 2025, Mwatana for Human Rights documented no fewer than 1,592 incidents of enforced disappearance involving 2,120 victims at the hands of various parties to the conflict in Yemen.

Providing Legal Support

Mwatana for Human Rights offers free legal assistance to victims of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention through a network of lawyers operating in 20 work areas covering the vast majority of Yemeni governorates.¹³⁸

Mwatana has provided legal support to at least 1,585 victims and contributed to uncovering the fate of dozens of missing persons through legal and field follow-up, after documenting all details of the incident and obtaining informed consent from the victim's family. This work has been carried out through field visits, meetings, and submission of legal memoranda to all relevant security, judicial, and other competent bodies, in an effort to reveal the fate of the victim and ensure justice.

Advocacy and Pressure

Mwatana for Human Rights issued a report titled "They Are Not Here", which highlighted incidents of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance carried out by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group authorities in the governorates of Sana'a, Taiz, Al Hudaydah, Hajjah, Ibb, Dhamar, and Amran.¹³⁹ It also issued a report titled "In the Darkness", which shed light on the conditions of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture in unofficial detention centers across various Yemeni governorates during the period from 2016 to 2020. The report drew on more than 2,566 interviews with victims and witnesses, reflecting the scale of

138 Mwatana for Human Rights, "A Responsible and Specialized Response to Isolated Appeals: Why Mwatana's Legal Support Unit?": <https://www.mwatana.org/posts-en/a-responsible-and-specialized-response-to-isolated-appeals>.

139 Mwatana for Human Rights (2017), "They Are Not Here: Incidents of Arbitrary Detention and Forcibly Disappearance under Ansar Allah (Al-Houthis) Armed Group Authority in Yemen": <https://www.mwatana.org/reports-en/they-are-not-here-8>.

violations in unofficial detention sites that operate outside any legal oversight.¹⁴⁰

The organization also launched a documentary film titled “The Unknown Fate”, presenting powerful stories of enforced disappearance victims and revealing the psychological and social impact of this crime, which is passed down through generations. The film highlighted the heavy legacy of enforced disappearance in Yemen as a tool for political repression and elimination of rivals, and as one of the most entrenched violations in the fabric of the armed conflict.¹⁴¹

Alongside its field and legal efforts, Mwatana for Human Rights places special emphasis on media documentation and the human narrative linked to victims of enforced disappearance. In this context, Mwatana regularly publishes blogs that shed light on the stories of disappeared victims by documenting the experiences and testimonies of their families, with the aim of preserving their collective memory and breaking the silence surrounding their fate.

Mwatana also launches annual community campaigns titled “Their Ramadan with Their Families” and “Their Eid with Their Families”, coinciding with the holy month of Ramadan, to remind the public of those who are forcibly disappeared and spend the month away from their families, without knowledge of their place of detention or fate. These campaigns aim to raise community awareness and call on relevant authorities to assume their legal and moral responsibilities toward the victims. They also strengthen the role of families of the disappeared in demanding disclosure of the fate of their loved ones, and reignite public consciousness about the crime.

At the international level, Mwatana regularly addresses the crime of enforced disappearance in its submissions under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council, in its briefings and interventions before the UN Security Council, in various international mechanisms and forums, and in meetings with international stakeholders—calling for concrete measures to release and reveal the fate of all those forcibly disappeared by all parties, and to ensure justice and reparations for victims.¹⁴²

It has also issued a specialized research paper titled “The Crime of Enforced Disappearance in Yemen”, prepared in partnership with the Smith Human Rights Clinic at Columbia University, which examined the historical background of the crime, studied comparative

140 Mwatana for Human Rights (2020, June 30), “In the Darkness: Abusive Detention, Disappearance and Torture in Yemen’s Unofficial Prisons”: <https://www.mwatana.org/reports-en/in-the-darkness-f>

141 Mwatana for Human Rights (2023, “The Unknown Fate”, documentary film: <https://www.mwatana.org/videos-en/the-unknown-fate>.

142 Mwatana for Human Rights, “Universal Periodic Review Reports”: <https://www.mwatana.org/reports-sub-categories-en/periodic-review-reports>.

Suspended Fates

cases, and recommended effective mechanisms for truth-seeking and justice.¹⁴³ In addition, Mwatana issues an annual statement and conducts an advocacy campaign to coincide with the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances on 30 August each year.

Mwatana for Human Rights also contributed to the establishment of the Association of Families of the Forcibly Disappeared in 2010 and has participated in advocacy campaigns concerning victims of enforced disappearance throughout various cycles of political conflict.

¹⁴³ Mwatana for Human Rights, "Crimes of Enforced Disappearance: A Research Paper Addressing Challenges and Proposing Solutions": <https://www.mwatana.org/reports-en/crimes-of-enforced-disappearance>.

Chapter Five

International Mechanisms for the Protection of Persons from Enforced Disappearance

Enforced disappearance is among the gravest violations of human dignity, particularly when committed during armed conflicts, as it is carried out in contexts lacking transparency and accountability. To ensure the protection of individuals from this crime, a set of international mechanisms has been established to oversee the implementation of the rules of international humanitarian law, monitor the conduct of parties to the conflict, and remind them of the necessity to comply with these rules. This work is undertaken by United Nations bodies, in line with the UN's role in maintaining international peace and security, in addition to the prominent humanitarian role of the International Committee of the Red Cross, mandated under the 1949 Geneva Conventions to monitor the conditions of victims and disseminate the principles of international humanitarian law. The international criminal justice system also contributes to holding perpetrators of enforced disappearance accountable, through ad hoc criminal tribunals—such as those for Nuremberg, Tokyo, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda—as well as the role of the International Criminal Court in combating impunity and ensuring justice for victims.

The United Nations

Recognizing the gravity of enforced disappearance and its role in maintaining international peace and security, the United Nations has adopted a range of international mechanisms aimed at preventing enforced disappearance, determining the fate of victims, and holding perpetrators accountable. This has been reflected in the adoption of relevant conventions and the activation of monitoring and accountability mechanisms—such as the Security Council, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances—in an effort to end this violation and ensure that its perpetrators do not escape justice.

The Role of the UN Security Council in Protecting Victims of Enforced Disappearance

The Security Council is one of the most prominent UN bodies in enforcing respect for the rules of international humanitarian law, given the extensive powers it enjoys under the UN Charter. Its resolutions are binding, enabling it to take a variety of measures to protect victims of armed conflict, including victims of enforced disappearance. These measures include:

- Applying peaceful pressure on parties to the conflict.

- Imposing economic sanctions.
- Adopting binding resolutions for states party to conflicts: On 11 June 2019, the Council adopted Resolution 2474 (2019), the first in its history to address the issue of missing persons in the context of armed conflict. The resolution urges all parties to the conflict to take “all appropriate measures to prevent persons from going missing”, to collect, preserve, and manage data and documents related to the missing, to actively search for them, recover and identify bodies, and return remains to families; to fully cooperate with the International Committee of the Red Cross; and to include provisions for the protection of the missing in peace agreements.¹⁴⁴
- Resorting to military force in the event of threats to or breaches of the peace.
- Imposing travel bans and asset freezes on officials.
- Referring cases to the International Criminal Court, even if the state concerned is not a party to the Rome Statute.
- Establishing peacekeeping forces, protected areas, and humanitarian corridors.
- Forming commissions of inquiry and appointing special advisers.
- Setting up mechanisms to compensate victims affected by serious violations of international humanitarian law.

However, the effectiveness of the Security Council remains contingent upon consensus among its permanent members. As a result, its decisions are often influenced by political interests and the use of the veto power. This reality weakens its ability to achieve international justice and hinders redress for victims, even in cases of flagrant violations of international law—a situation that applies equally to its handling of enforced disappearance in various contexts.

The Role of the Security Council in Cases of Enforced Disappearance in Yemen

Despite the numerous violations Yemen has witnessed during years of conflict—including the crime of enforced disappearance—the role of the Security Council has not matched the gravity of the challenges posed by this crime. Although the Council has issued several resolutions relating to the situation in Yemen, most notably Resolution 2216 (2015), which

¹⁴⁴ United Nations, (2019, June 11), “Security Council Adopts First-Ever Resolution on Persons Reported Missing during Armed Conflict, as Speakers Call for Greater Political Will to Address Problem” [Press Release], Retrieved June 7, 2025: <https://press.un.org/en/2019/sc13835.doc.htm>.

called on the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group to immediately release all persons under house arrest or arbitrarily detained, to free former Yemeni Minister of Defense Major General Mahmoud al-Subaihi and all political prisoners, and to respect international humanitarian law and human rights, these resolutions did not directly or comprehensively address the crime of enforced disappearance or the accountability of its perpetrators.¹⁴⁵

In addition, pursuant to paragraph 21 of Resolution 2140 (2014), the Security Council established the Panel of Experts on Yemen, which initially comprised four experts, later expanding its mandate and membership to five experts under Resolution 2216 (2015). In its letter to the President of the Security Council dated 20 February 2015, the Panel referred to enforced disappearance among what it described as other human rights violations used as a means to obstruct the transitional process. Paragraph 172 of the letter noted difficulties faced by the Ministry of Human Rights in enacting essential legislation, particularly those related to transitional justice and cases of enforced disappearance. It also referred to Cabinet Resolution No. 108 of 2012, which mandated the release of all prisoners of conscience and the disclosure of information regarding those forcibly disappeared, in line with paragraph 13(d) of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Agreement. The responsibility for follow-up was assigned to both the Security Committee and the Ministry of Human Rights.¹⁴⁶

Pursuant to this mandate, the Minister of Human Rights contacted the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, Political Security Organization, National Security Bureau, Republican Guard, and First Armored Division, requesting the release of all those held arbitrarily. While these bodies declared that they had no unlawful detainees or cases of enforced disappearance in their custody, investigations by the Security Committee revealed that several individuals were being held outside any legal framework in detention facilities run by the Political Security Organization, the National Security Bureau, and military intelligence. By August 2014, the fate of 17 related cases had yet to be determined.¹⁴⁷

The letter also reported testimonies received by the Panel indicating that cooperation from the Political Security Organization was below the required level, with suspicions expressed that some government officials at the time were deliberately attempting to conceal information on these cases. Other sources informed the Panel that a number of figures from the former regime and members of the General People's Congress close to former President

145 United Nations Security Council (2015, April 14), Resolution 2216 (2015) on Yemen [Security Council Resolution]: [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2216%20\(2015\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2216%20(2015)).

146 United Nations, Security Council (2015, February 20), Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to resolution 2140 (2014) [Security Council document S/2015/125] <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2015/125>.

147 Ibid.

Ali Abdullah Saleh used all available means to obstruct investigative and follow-up efforts in these cases.¹⁴⁸

In its final report letter to the President of the Security Council dated 2 November 2023,¹⁴⁹ the Panel of Experts on Yemen documented that all parties to the conflict in Yemen resorted to arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance against men, women, and children. The report noted that such practices were often justified on grounds of the victims' alleged affiliation with opposition groups, under the guise of counterterrorism, or for ransom purposes. Victims included broad segments of the civilian population—human rights activists, members of civil society organizations, staff of local and international administrations, humanitarian workers, and journalists of both genders. In some cases, they were ordinary citizens with no political or military affiliation.¹⁵⁰

The Panel's investigations also revealed that some individuals who had been forcibly disappeared and presumed dead had their spouses remarry and their inheritance distributed, only to discover upon release that nothing remained for them. The resulting economic and psychological strain drove some to suicide.¹⁵¹

It is noteworthy that the Security Council has addressed the Yemeni crisis through a political and security-oriented approach, focusing on a political transition process without activating accountability mechanisms for serious violations, including enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and torture. Nor has the Council exercised its authority to refer the situation in Yemen to the International Criminal Court, despite documented indicators from international organizations—such as the United Nations Group of Eminent Experts—of violations by parties to the conflict amounting to war crimes.¹⁵²

This inaction leaves the Security Council open to criticism regarding the limited effectiveness of its role in protecting civilians in Yemen and underscores the need to activate more independent international mechanisms and to push for the establishment of an independent international investigative commission tasked with documenting violations and prosecuting

148 Ibid.

149 United Nations, Security Council (2 November 2023), Letter dated 2 November 2023 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council, Document No. S/2023/833: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4028446?ln=en&v=pdf>.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.

152 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (December 2020), UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen Briefs the UN Security Council Urging an end to impunity, an expansion of sanctions, and the referral by the UN Security Council of the situation in Yemen to the International Criminal Court [Press Release]: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/12/un-group-eminant-international-and-regional-experts-yemen-briefs-un-security>.

those responsible—including for the crime of enforced disappearance, which continues to deprive hundreds of Yemenis of their most basic right to know the fate of their loved ones.

The Role of the United Nations General Assembly in Protecting Persons from Enforced Disappearance

The United Nations General Assembly is one of the most prominent international bodies that has contributed to strengthening the protection of human rights during armed conflicts, including efforts to combat the crime of enforced disappearance. The General Assembly played an active role in the process that led to the adoption of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, helping to shape international awareness of the gravity of this crime.

However, the General Assembly's resolutions are not legally binding; they remain political and moral recommendations lacking the legal and enforcement power to compel states or parties to a conflict to comply. This limits their direct impact on the ground in situations involving serious violations such as those occurring in Yemen. Nevertheless, the Assembly's role in entrenching human rights principles and guiding international will remains highly significant, as it can pave the way for stronger and more effective mechanisms from other United Nations bodies, such as the Security Council or the Human Rights Council, aimed at holding those responsible for enforced disappearance accountable and providing redress for victims.

The Role of the Human Rights Council in Protecting Persons from Enforced Disappearance

The Human Rights Council was established on 15 March 2006 by a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, replacing the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.¹⁵³ Headquartered in Geneva, the Council is tasked with investigating human rights violations in member states and making recommendations on them through special procedures and other mechanisms. While the Council gives special attention to human rights in situations of armed conflict, its resolutions remain non-binding, limited to recommendations, appeals, and condemnations of states that violate human rights.

Nonetheless, the Council activates a range of monitoring tools to protect individuals from enforced disappearance, most notably:

153 United Nations, Human Rights Council, Resolution A/RES/60/251 (15 March 2006).

Special Procedures Related to Enforced Disappearance

The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances is one of the most prominent UN mechanisms dedicated to combating the crime of enforced disappearance. It was established under United Nations Commission on Human Rights Resolution 20 (XXXVI) of 29 February 1980, and its mandate was most recently extended by the Human Rights Council through Resolution 54/14.¹⁵⁴

This Working Group plays a vital role in supporting families searching for their forcibly disappeared loved ones, by receiving reports from victims' relatives or human rights organizations and engaging with relevant governments to urge them to open investigations and provide clear information on the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared.

Under the 1992 Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Working Group is mandated to monitor states' compliance with the Declaration's provisions and to provide advice and assistance in their implementation. It also undertakes field visits and provides advisory services upon request, in its effort to strengthen international cooperation in confronting this complex crime, which is often documented in contexts of conflict or political repression.¹⁵⁵

In relation to Yemen, the Working Group announced in September 2019 that it would begin documenting violations amounting to enforced disappearance perpetrated by non-state actors and individuals, including those performing functions of government or exercising de facto control over territory and population. Pursuant to this, the Group referred 92 cases to the de facto authorities in Sana'a, namely the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group.¹⁵⁶

On 25 August 2023, the Working Group issued a joint allegation letter addressed to the internationally recognized Government of Yemen, in cooperation with other UN human rights mechanisms. The letter concluded that there was a "shortcoming and inadequacy of the mechanisms adopted by the internationally recognized Government of Yemen to provide full and effective reparation and compensation to victims of serious violations of international human rights law and grave breaches of international humanitarian law committed during

¹⁵⁴ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). Special Procedures: Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-disappearances>.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2021, December 16), Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances on its activities for the period ending 2020: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/57/54>.

the armed conflict in Yemen, commensurate with the scale of the harm inflicted and suffered, as well as in conducting effective investigations into the violations and prosecuting their perpetrators.”¹⁵⁷

Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence

The mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence is closely linked to the issue of enforced disappearance, as this violation constitutes one of the most serious infringements on fundamental human rights. Documenting cases of enforced disappearance and registering them in official records is considered an essential step in uncovering the truth and determining the fate of the disappeared. Holding those responsible for enforced disappearances accountable is a central focus of the Special Rapporteur’s mandate, as his reports call for effective investigations and fair trials for the perpetrators of such crimes—measures that reinforce justice, enshrine the principle of accountability, and strengthen guarantees of non-recurrence.

Although the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence has not yet been granted permission to visit the country, his annual and thematic reports include recommendations and conclusions drawn from comparable international experiences, which can be applied to support transitional justice processes in Yemen—particularly in the areas of documenting enforced disappearances, prosecuting those responsible, and establishing effective reparation mechanisms.¹⁵⁸

Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Mechanism

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism entails a comprehensive assessment of the human rights record of each United Nations Member State approximately once every four years. The state under review submits a national report, complemented by written submissions from other stakeholders such as reviewing states, regional bodies, and civil society organizations. The review takes place during an interactive dialogue session between the delegation of the state under review and representatives of Member States, during which questions and comments are raised on human rights issues. The process concludes with the adoption of a set of recommendations aimed at improving the human rights situation. Among

¹⁵⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Joint Allegation Letter and Response – Yemen, document A/HRC/WGEID/132/1: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WGEID/132/1>.

¹⁵⁸ Mwatana for Human Rights, “Crimes of Enforced Disappearance: A Research Paper Addressing Challenges and Proposing Solutions”: <https://www.mwatana.org/reports-en/crimes-of-enforced-disappearance>.

the violations that may be addressed in this review is enforced disappearance, should it be observed as a violation committed in a particular state that must be addressed.

Successive Yemeni governments have so far participated in four cycles of the UPR. During each cycle, numerous recommendations were made by various states urging the government to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. In its thirty-second session (2019), Yemen sought to demonstrate its responsiveness to these recommendations by announcing its initial approval to join the Convention and issuing directives to the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Human Rights to initiate the necessary legal procedures to refer it to the House of Representatives for ratification. The government also cited Cabinet Decree No. 48 of 2013, which mandated the drafting of a law on missing persons and victims of enforced disappearance. However, political deterioration and the suspension of parliamentary sessions following the takeover of the capital Sana'a by the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group and the onset of the ongoing armed conflict prevented its enactment.¹⁵⁹

To strengthen protection measures, the government's report indicated that the Ministry of Human Rights activated a General Department to receive complaints and reports related to arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, and that it hosted 31 sessions within the framework of the National Dialogue in which the issue of independent investigations into cases of enforced disappearance and truth-seeking was raised. The government also announced that it had prepared a draft decision to approve the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and referred it to Parliament, but it was removed from the legislative agenda due to security conditions.¹⁶⁰

The national report also highlighted that the draft of the new constitution contains provisions guaranteeing individual liberty, bodily integrity, and dignity, and prohibiting arrest, detention, or surveillance except by specific judicial orders—thus enshrining legal protection against enforced disappearance even in the absence of ratification of the Convention. Finally, the government stated that it had cooperated with civil society organizations to obtain lists of detainees and victims of enforced disappearance held in the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group prisons, submitted them to the Prime Minister's Office, and disbursed monthly allowances to the families of 2,400 of them.¹⁶¹

Despite these commitments and measures, Yemen had not formally ratified the

159 Yemen's Universal Periodic Review: Third Cycle Report, January 2019: <https://nwm.unescwa.org/index.php/resources/370>.

160 Ibid.

161 Ibid, <https://nwm.unescwa.org/index.php/resources/370>.

Convention prior to its forty-sixth UPR session (2023), during which it once again received recommendations to ratify it. The national report affirmed that the resumption of parliamentary sessions is the essential prerequisite for implementing Cabinet Decree No. 48 of 2013 and completing the ratification process of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.¹⁶²

Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen (GEE)

The Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen (GEE), established by the Human Rights Council, is one of the most prominent United Nations mechanisms that has worked to document grave human rights violations in Yemen. It was created on 29 September 2017 at the request of the Human Rights Council to the High Commissioner, as an independent and impartial body tasked with monitoring and documenting serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law committed since September 2014 across Yemen.

The mandate of the GEE is to monitor and report on the human rights situation; investigate all alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law committed by all parties to the conflict since September 2014; provide general recommendations on the protection and promotion of human rights; offer guidance on access to justice, accountability, and reconciliation; exchange information; and support national, regional, and international efforts aimed at strengthening accountability for violations and abuses of human rights in Yemen.¹⁶³

The Group issued its last report in September 2021, before a decision was taken not to renew its mandate—marking a setback in international oversight of violations committed in the country.

Regarding the GEE's documentation of the crime of enforced disappearance in Yemen, its final report concluded that all parties to the conflict in Yemen—including the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group—are responsible, to varying degrees, for committing cases of enforced disappearance, particularly against journalists, human rights defenders, and members of religious minorities.

The Group confirmed that enforced disappearance is often a prelude to more serious violations, such as torture, sexual violence, and the denial of victims' right to a fair trial. The report also noted that these violations are often carried out with the aim of silencing perceived opposition, punishing victims for their religious beliefs, and legitimizing the

162 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Universal Periodic Review- Yemen: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/ye-index>.

163 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Council, Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/yemen-gee/index>.

authority in power by instilling fear—making it one of the gravest forms of violations against human dignity and fundamental rights.¹⁶⁴

Committee on Enforced Disappearances

The Committee on Enforced Disappearances was established under Article 26 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It is an independent international body responsible for monitoring the extent to which States Parties comply with their obligations under the Convention. The Committee is composed of a number of independent experts of recognized competence, integrity, and international standing in the field of human rights. They are elected by secret ballot from a list of candidates nominated by States Parties, with each nominee being a national of the nominating State. Elections are held during the annual meetings of States Parties to the Convention, and members serve a four-year term, renewable in accordance with the applicable rules.¹⁶⁵

The Committee enjoys broad powers under the provisions of the Convention, with a mandate to oversee States Parties' fulfillment of their obligations to protect individuals from the crime of enforced disappearance. It works in close coordination with various United Nations bodies, including specialized offices and agencies, and cooperates with other treaty bodies established under international human rights conventions—most notably the Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These partnerships open multiple avenues for coordinating efforts and exchanging expertise with the aim of strengthening the international framework to combat enforced disappearance.¹⁶⁶

Under established procedures, each State Party to the Convention is required to submit a periodic report to the Committee, providing a detailed account of the legislative, administrative, and judicial measures it has taken to implement the Convention's provisions. The Committee carefully reviews the report and issues concluding observations containing a comprehensive assessment of the State's compliance, along with recommendations aimed at improving performance and fulfilling international obligations. The State Party is required to respond to these observations, and the Committee may request additional information if necessary.¹⁶⁷

164 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Report of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen GEE (A/HRC/48/20). Geneva: United Nations, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A-HRC-48-20-AUV.pdf>

165 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced>.

166 Ibid.

167 Ibid.

The Committee also has the authority to receive individual communications—complaints submitted by individuals or their legal representatives alleging that a State Party has violated their rights or the rights of their relatives under the Convention. This mechanism is among the most important tools enabling victims or their families to pursue an international legal remedy, provided the State concerned has recognized the Committee’s competence to examine such communications, as stipulated by the Convention.

The Committee may also consider inter-State complaints, whereby one State Party may submit a complaint against another State Party alleging non-compliance with its obligations. Such complaints are subject to a series of complex procedures aimed at verifying the claims and resolving the dispute through cooperation and mutual respect.

Despite the Committee’s significant importance and advanced powers, Yemen’s failure to accede to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance poses a major obstacle to benefiting from these specialized mechanisms. Since Yemen has not ratified the Convention, the Committee cannot receive periodic reports from it, nor can Yemeni individuals or organizations submit complaints to the Committee concerning cases of enforced disappearance within Yemen’s territory. The Committee also cannot consider inter-State complaints involving Yemen, due to the absence of a direct legal obligation by the Yemeni government toward the Convention’s provisions.

Encouraging Yemen to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance is a necessary step to enable victims to access justice and to ensure the State is subject to an international system of oversight and accountability that safeguards human rights—particularly in light of the challenges posed by the armed conflict and recurring reports of grave violations, including enforced disappearance.

International Fact-Finding Commission

The International Fact-Finding Commission was established in 1991 pursuant to Article (90) of Additional Protocol I of 1977 to the Four Geneva Conventions, with the aim of promoting respect for international humanitarian law and ensuring the guarantees afforded to victims of armed conflicts. The Commission is a permanent body mandated to investigate allegations of serious violations or grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I, making it one of the most important international mechanisms to ensure compliance with humanitarian law during armed conflicts.

The Commission’s core mandate is to investigate any incident alleged to constitute a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions or Additional Protocol I, in addition to exercising what is known as “good offices” to facilitate respect for international humanitarian law by parties

to a conflict. The Commission does not investigate minor violations; its scope is limited to grave breaches. Its role is confined to determining whether such violations occurred, without having executive powers, the authority to impose sanctions, issue judgments, or even pose legal questions regarding the facts it establishes. Moreover, its findings are not made public; rather, they are submitted to the parties concerned—and possibly to other relevant States—along with recommendations and observations aimed at enhancing compliance with the law.¹⁶⁸

Although the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I apply primarily to international armed conflicts, the International Fact-Finding Commission has declared its readiness to consider violations committed in non-international armed conflicts, provided that all parties to the conflict consent to its involvement.¹⁶⁹ This requirement has proven to be a major obstacle in many contemporary conflicts, including the ongoing armed conflict in Yemen, which is classified as a non-international, multi-party conflict. The impact of this condition is not limited to Yemen; it has been the primary reason for the Commission's inactivity since its establishment in 1991, as it has never been activated in any armed conflict worldwide. This reality underscores the challenges that limit the practical effectiveness of this international mechanism.

In the context of the ongoing conflict in Yemen since 2014, and in light of repeated international reports documenting grave violations of international humanitarian law, including enforced disappearance, the absence of activation of the International Fact-Finding Commission highlights yet another gap in the international accountability framework. It also brings into focus the practical challenges that hinder the Commission's work in non-international armed conflicts and raises the need to develop or adopt alternative international mechanisms that are more flexible and independent to ensure accountability and prevent impunity in such situations.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is one of the oldest and most prominent humanitarian organizations in the world. It was founded in Geneva in 1863 at the initiative of Swiss businessman Henry Dunant, who, after witnessing the horrors of the Battle of Solferino, called for the creation of an organization dedicated to protecting

¹⁶⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, International Fact-Finding Commission: https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/fact_finding_commission.pdf.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

and assisting the victims of war.¹⁷⁰ Since then, the ICRC has evolved into an independent, non-governmental humanitarian organization with a special legal status recognized under the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, the Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005, and the International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.¹⁷¹

The ICRC's core mission is to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to victims of armed conflicts and other situations of violence—whether international or non-international—through field operations that include delivering relief and food aid, providing healthcare and psychological support, visiting prisoners of war and detainees, assessing detention conditions, and maintaining confidential communication with them. The ICRC also plays a key role in urging parties to conflicts to respect the rules of international humanitarian law.¹⁷²

The Committee is committed to encouraging States to align their national legislation with international humanitarian standards and to monitor the implementation of treaty obligations, including enacting laws to punish violations of international humanitarian law. Under its mandate, the ICRC is granted the right of humanitarian initiative, which empowers it to intervene and monitor even in situations not formally classified as armed conflicts, provided there are indicators of widespread violence or serious violations warranting action to protect victims.

One of the ICRC's most notable components is the Central Tracing Agency, which is responsible for locating missing and forcibly disappeared persons, gathering information from parties to a conflict, and facilitating communication between separated family members. This role is essential in upholding the right to know the fate of missing relatives, a right enshrined in international humanitarian law.¹⁷³

In Yemen, the ICRC continues to conduct regular visits to detainees in official facilities and acts as a neutral intermediary in prisoner exchanges and releases. At the same time, it operates family reunification activities, seeking to determine the whereabouts of people whose traces were lost due to the conflict and informing their families of the results.¹⁷⁴ The ICRC also works to trace individuals who have gone missing as a result of armed conflict

170 International Committee of the Red Cross, Our History: <https://www.icrc.org/en/our-history>.

171 International Committee of the Red Cross, Our mandate and mission <https://www.icrc.org>.

172 Ibid.

173 International Committee of the Red Cross, The Central Tracing Agency: <https://missingpersons.icrc.org/about-us>.

174 International Committee of the Red Cross, Statement on the missing and dead by Daphnee Maret, Head of ICRC Delegation in Yemen, 2023: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/statement-missing-and-dead-daphnee-maret-head-icrc-delegation-yemen>.

or migration, providing their relatives with information about their fate. It organizes the reunification of children formerly associated with armed groups and offers them both material and psychological support.¹⁷⁵

In partnership with the Yemen Red Crescent Society, the ICRC acts as a neutral intermediary in returning human remains to victims' families or to conflict parties upon request. It also helps strengthen the capacities of local authorities responsible for managing human remains by providing technical expertise, equipment, and supplies, and by assisting in the rehabilitation of necessary infrastructure. In addition, the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies support the Yemen Red Crescent Society in enhancing its emergency response and family reunification programs.¹⁷⁶

175 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (n.d.). Protection of family links in the Near and Middle East (including Yemen). https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document/file_list/leaflet_protection_of_family_links_-_en_03_-_web.pdf.

176 Ibid.

Recommendations

To the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group:

1. Adhere to the principles and rules of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and applicable national legislation, including international conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants, and all treaties that Yemen has committed to uphold under Article (6) of the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen.
2. Immediately cease committing crimes of enforced disappearance.
3. Disclose the fate of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, release them, provide redress to the victims, and ensure accountability for those responsible for such violations.
4. Initiate prompt and transparent investigations into crimes of enforced disappearance and their surrounding circumstances, and hold those responsible to account.
5. Take effective steps to provide reparations to victims of enforced disappearance and their families and to ensure their redress.
6. Establish a register of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, including victims' names, the dates and places of their detention, and the measures taken in their regard.
7. Cooperate with relevant United Nations mechanisms, in particular the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and facilitate their access to information, victims' testimonies, and detention facilities.
8. Work to reform security agencies and activate the roles of both the Public Prosecution and the Inspector General, ensuring compliance with legal procedures relating to arrest, detention, pretrial detention, and other judicial processes.
9. Close all unofficial detention facilities, place official detention facilities under monitoring, and enable humanitarian organizations and international agencies to have safe access to them.
10. Provide conditions of detention that meet international standards for places of detention, ensuring detainees remain in a safe and healthy environment.

To the internationally recognized government and formations affiliated with the Islah Party:

1. Adhere to the principles and rules of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and applicable national legislation, including international conventions, the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants, and all treaties that Yemen has committed to uphold under Article (6) of the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen.

2. Immediately cease committing crimes of enforced disappearance.
3. Disclose the fate of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, release them, provide redress to the victims, and ensure accountability for those responsible for such violations.
4. Open secure channels of communication with the families of the forcibly disappeared, especially victims of previous cycles of conflict, to inform them of any immediate developments concerning their relatives.
5. Initiate prompt and transparent investigations into crimes of enforced disappearance and their surrounding circumstances, and hold those responsible to account.
6. Take effective steps to provide reparations to victims of enforced disappearance and their families and to ensure their redress.
7. Ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.
8. Establish a national register of the forcibly disappeared and create a database containing victims' details and the circumstances of their disappearance.
9. Cooperate with United Nations mechanisms, including the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and UN Special Rapporteurs.
10. Work to reform security agencies and activate the roles of both the Public Prosecution and the Inspector General, ensuring compliance with legal procedures relating to arrest, detention, pretrial detention, and other judicial processes.
11. Close all unofficial detention facilities, place official detention facilities under monitoring, and enable humanitarian organizations and international agencies to have safe access to them.
12. Provide conditions of detention that meet international standards for places of detention, ensuring detainees remain in a safe and healthy environment.

To the Southern Transitional Council:

1. Adhere to the principles and rules of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and applicable national legislation, including international conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants, and all treaties that Yemen has committed to uphold under Article (6) of the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen.
2. Immediately cease committing crimes of enforced disappearance.
3. Disclose the fate of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, release them, provide redress to the victims, and ensure accountability for those responsible for such violations.
4. Initiate prompt and transparent investigations into crimes of enforced disappearance and their surrounding circumstances, and hold those responsible to account.
5. Take effective steps to provide reparations to victims of enforced disappearance and their families and to ensure their redress.
6. Establish a register of persons subjected to enforced disappearance, including victims' names, the dates and places of their detention, and the measures taken in their regard.
7. Cooperate with relevant United Nations mechanisms, in particular the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and facilitate their access to information, victims' testimonies, and detention facilities.
8. Work to reform security forces and formations, and activate the roles of both the Public Prosecution and the Inspector General, ensuring compliance with legal procedures relating to arrest, detention, pretrial detention, and other judicial processes.
9. Close all unofficial detention facilities, place official detention facilities under monitoring, and enable humanitarian organizations and international agencies to have safe access to them.
10. Provide conditions of detention that meet international standards for places of detention, ensuring detainees remain in a safe and healthy environment.

To national and international human rights civil society:

1. Strengthen efforts to monitor and document crimes of enforced disappearance and the various violations suffered by victims and their families.
2. Raise awareness within communities and among the parties to the conflict about the risks and impacts of enforced disappearance.
3. Examine and study the causes and consequences of enforced disappearance and identify means of addressing them based on sound scientific and methodological approaches.
4. Enhance advocacy and pressure efforts aimed at securing the release of victims of enforced disappearance.
5. Facilitate meetings between the families of the forcibly disappeared in Yemen, and support alliance-building efforts to coordinate the exchange of information and advocacy strategies among organizations concerned with the forcibly disappeared in Yemen.
6. Advocate for the presumption of life for victims of enforced disappearance to facilitate search efforts, regardless of the circumstances or timing of the disappearance.
7. Utilize available channels of communication through international mechanisms to establish a register of enforced disappearance cases.

To the United Nations and the international community:

1. Support peace efforts that can help end the conflict and the violations associated with it, foremost among them enforced disappearance.
2. Initiate transparent and independent investigations to identify the different parties involved in committing enforced disappearance crimes in Yemen, and take effective steps to end the culture of impunity.
3. Press for Yemen's ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and other relevant treaties.
4. Pressure the parties to the conflict to disclose the fate of the forcibly disappeared, release those arbitrarily detained, end torture and other forms of ill-treatment, and cease all human rights violations.
5. The Security Council should refer the situation in Yemen to the International Criminal Court.

6. Integrate enforced disappearance into the transitional justice process, ensuring that any political settlement or peace negotiation includes a clear mechanism for addressing enforced disappearance: truth-seeking, accountability, reparations, and social reintegration.
7. Work to establish a judicial mechanism with jurisdiction over enforced disappearance cases across the various cycles of political conflict in Yemen, tasked with receiving complaints, reviewing records, hearing testimonies, conducting investigations, determining victims' fates, providing reparations, ensuring compensation, pursuing accountability, and facilitating commemoration.

Acknowledgment and Appreciation

This report, in both its Arabic and English versions, is the product of a collective effort led by Mwatana for Human Rights through its Legal Support Unit, which worked on preparing, organizing, and analyzing its content, based on persistent and tireless work in following up the cases of victims of enforced disappearance and their families, and in providing them with legal support at all stages despite the many challenges and obstacles.

Mwatana extends its profound gratitude and appreciation to the lawyers in the Legal Support Unit, who exerted relentless effort in representing victims, pursuing their cases before relevant authorities, and insisting that the rights to truth, justice, and redress become a reality.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to the families of the victims who showed courage in sharing their testimonies and experiences, and who bore the burden of retelling their suffering, driven by their conviction in the importance of uncovering the truth and learning the fate of their loved ones.

Mwatana calls on all actors, locally and internationally, to take seriously the facts and recommendations presented in this report, and to make them part of the broader efforts to end the crime of enforced disappearance and to guarantee its non-repetition.

Suspended Fates

Enforced Disappearance Crimes Committed During the Armed Conflict in Yemen

Since the 1960s, Yemen has carried a heavy legacy of grievances from cycles of political conflict, coups, wars, and authoritarian rule. Enforced disappearance has been at the forefront—used to repress, eliminate rivals, and silence voices—while historic opportunities to address the issue, uncover the truth, provide justice, and guarantee non-recurrence were squandered.

Since late 2014, with the armed conflict entering its second decade, the crime has expanded dramatically, becoming a systematic practice by all parties. Hundreds of civilians—including activists, journalists, academics, lawyers, civil servants, humanitarian workers, and ordinary citizens—were abducted from homes, detained at checkpoints, or seized from workplaces, then disappeared in secret detention sites, deprived of liberty and any legal protection, while their families endured years of painful waiting and futile searches.

This report by Mwatana for Human Rights draws on over 2,068 in-depth field interviews with victims' families and eyewitnesses, documenting at least 2,120 victims of enforced disappearance between September 2014 and July 2025. It assigns responsibility across the Ansar Allah (Houthi) group, the internationally recognized government, the Southern Transitional Council, the Saudi- and UAE-led Coalition, the Joint Forces on the West Coast, Eritrean forces, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Suspended Fates provides a comprehensive reading of the historical and legal context of enforced disappearance in Yemen, analyzing patterns and objectives—from targeting activists and opponents to arbitrary suspicion of passersby. It recounts testimonies, documents legal aid and advocacy efforts, and reviews international protection mechanisms.

The report stands as both indictment and testimony to one of Yemen's gravest crimes against humanity, and as an urgent call to end it, disclose the fate of the disappeared, and guarantee justice and reparation as part of any just and comprehensive peace.



Mwatana
for Human Rights

info@mwatana.org
www.mwatana.org