

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers

Ref.: UA OTH 162/2025
(Please use this reference in your reply)

17 December 2025

Sir,

We have the honour to address you in our capacity as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/4, 60/8, 54/14, 52/9 and 53/12.

We are independent human rights experts appointed and mandated by the United Nations Human Rights Council to report and advise on human rights issues from a thematic or country-specific perspective. We are part of the special procedures system of the United Nations, which has 59 thematic and country mandates on a broad range of human rights issues. We are sending this letter under the communications procedure of the Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council to seek clarification on information we have received. Special Procedures mechanisms can intervene directly with Governments and other stakeholders (including companies) on allegations of abuses of human rights that come within their mandates by means of letters, which include urgent appeals, allegation letters, and other communications. The intervention may relate to a human rights violation that has already occurred, is ongoing, or which has a high risk of occurring. The process involves sending a letter to the concerned actors identifying the facts of the allegation, applicable international human rights norms and standards, the concerns and questions of the mandate-holder(s), and a request for follow-up action. Communications may deal with individual cases, general patterns and trends of human rights violations, cases affecting a particular group or community, or the content of draft or existing legislation, policy or practice considered not to be fully compatible with international human rights standards.

In this connection, we would like to bring to your attention information we have received concerning the arbitrary arrest of lawyer and human rights defender Mr. **Abdulmajeed Sabra** and his detention in an unknown location, which entails an act tantamount to an enforced disappearance, by the Ansar Allah movement, or the Houthi movement, the *de facto* authority in Sana'a and large parts of northern Yemen.

Mr. **Abdulmajeed Sabra** is a prominent lawyer who has defended victims of enforced disappearance and acts tantamount to and detainees charged in connection with their peaceful exercise of human rights in Yemen. He also uses his Facebook page to defend human rights, express his own views and publish updates on cases he defends.

Ansar Allah movement

According to the information received:

Background information:

Mr. Sabra has over the past few years been interrogated a number of times by security agents regarding his defence of victims of arbitrary arrest and of enforced disappearance and act tantamount to, and he also has been barred from defending his clients in court. He was reportedly threatened in 2024 by Houthi members after he posted on social media that he would defend persons arrested after they commemorated 26 September.¹ The date marks the anniversary of the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962, which the Ansar Allah, or Houthi movement, the *de facto* rulers in Sana'a do not recognise. They instead consider that 21 September, the day they took power in northern Yemen should be celebrated.

On 24 September 2025, Mr. Sabra posted on his Facebook page criticism of restrictions imposed by the *de facto* rulers on the right of the public to commemorate on social media the 26 September Revolution. The Ansar Allah authorities had set up roadblocks in the lead up to 26 September, and had arrested dozens of people, including writers and activists, in relation to their support on social media for the anniversary.

Arrest and act tantamount to enforced disappearance:

On 25 September 2025, armed forces, some in uniform and some in civilian clothing belonging to the security and intelligence agency of the Ansar Allah authority stormed Mr. Sabra's office in Sana'a and took him to an unknown location. The men presented him with an arrest warrant and reportedly told him his arrest was due to a post on social media about the 26 September Revolution. No details were available.

Mr. Sabra's family did not have any information on his fate and whereabouts for ten days and were not able to communicate with him, which may entail an act tantamount to enforced disappearance.

On 5 October 2025, Mr. Sabra contacted his family by phone from an unidentified number and reassured them of his wellbeing.

On 16 October 2025, Mr. Sabra's family contacted the public number of the security and intelligence agency and asked if they should bring clothing or any supplies for him. They were told he was well and in no need of more clothes. It was not clarified exactly where he was being held.

It was later learnt from unofficial sources that Mr. Sabra was to undergo a session of cultural training, often provided to political detainees by Houthi security and intelligence agency for weeks or months, ahead of their release.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/06/yemen-houthis-arrest-dozens-commemorating-national-holiday>

On 20 October 2025, Mr. Sabra called his family by phone from an unidentified number and told them he was being held in isolation in a cell; he asked his family to alert lawyers and the Yemen Bar Association, which is headquartered in Sana'a, about his case. His request was made public on social media. On the same day, the Bar Association announced the formation of a team of eight lawyers to follow the case of Mr. Sabra's detention and to represent the bar association at official and legal venues.

Mr. Sabra is believed to be held by the security and intelligence agency; although his whereabouts remain unknown.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of the aforementioned allegations, we wish to stress that in addition to its obligations under international humanitarian law, the Ansar Allah movement, as the *de facto* authority in the territory concerned, is responsible for ensuring the human rights of individuals under their effective control.

In connection to these allegations, we express our utmost concern that the arrest of Mr. Sabra, a human rights defender and lawyer, was in relation to his peaceful human rights defence work and the exercise of his right to freedom of expression, in what may amount to an act of arbitrary arrest.

We further express our grave concern at his detention in isolation in an undeclared place, in what entails an act tantamount to enforced disappearance. We would like to emphasize that the prohibition of enforced disappearance and the corresponding obligation to investigate them has attained the status of *jus cogens* under international law. Moreover, enforced disappearance is prohibited pursuant to customary international humanitarian law and each party to the conflict must take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing and must provide their family members with any information it has on their fate.

Further, we wish to underscore that any judicial proceeding shall comply with the due process and fair trial guarantees required by international law. These include the right to be promptly informed about the charges, access to family, the right to be represented by legal counsel and to be brought before a judicial officer promptly after detention.

In this context, we wish to recall that in accordance with articles 3 and 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person and no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. In accordance with the jurisprudence of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, arrest or detention as punishment for the legitimate exercise of human rights is arbitrary. We also recall that under article 19 UDHR everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. These rights appear to have been violated in Mr. Sabra's case, and we call on the *de facto* authorities to enforce them.

We would also like to recall the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, which provides guarantees for the functioning of lawyers, and in article 16 calls on

governments to ensure that lawyers are able to perform all their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference. Article 20 states that lawyers shall enjoy civil and penal immunity for relevant statements made in good faith in written or oral pleadings or in their professional appearance before a court, tribunal or other legal or administrative authority.

In this regard, we also refer you to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration which state that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that all parties to the conflict between the Houthi movement and the government in Aden are bound by common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which establishes minimum standards concerning the treatment and protection of civilians, those no longer actively participating in hostilities and civilian objects.

In addition, where the Houthi movement engages in actions that are unrelated to the conflict and are not direct consequences of it, the governing legal framework should be international human rights law. In practice, this means that the Houthi movement is legally bound to respect freedom of expression, freedom of association and other internationally recognised human rights, and these rights should be protected without discrimination on any of the grounds prohibited by international law.

The full texts of the human rights instruments and standards recalled above are available on www.ohchr.org or can be provided upon request.

In view of the urgency of the matter, we would appreciate a response as soon as possible on the initial steps taken to safeguard the rights of Mr. Abdulmajeed Sabra in compliance with international instruments.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would also be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and any comment you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide detailed information on the current place and conditions of deprivation of liberty of Mr. Sabra, including whether he can have contact with his family and lawyers and whether he has been brought before a judge. Please explain how these conditions are consistent with the provisions for due process and fair trial under international law. Please provide also detailed information on the state of health of Mr. Sabra.

3. Please clarify the legal grounds for Mr. Sabra's deprivation of liberty as well as the charges he is facing and explain how these comply with international human rights law and standards.
4. Please indicate what measures have been taken to ensure that human rights defenders and lawyers as well as civil society organisations under the Ansar Allah movement's *de facto* rule are able to carry out their peaceful and legitimate work in a safe and enabling environment without fear of threats or acts of intimidation and harassment of any kind.

This communication and any response received from you will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to prevent any irreparable harm to the life and personal integrity of Mr. Sabra, to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence.

We would like to bring to your attention that should sources submit the allegations concerning individual cases of acts tantamount to enforced disappearances for the consideration of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances under its humanitarian procedure, the case will be examined by the Working Group according to its methods of work, in which case you will be informed by separate correspondence.

We would like to underline that this letter addressed to the *de facto* authorities in the concerned region of Yemen does not in any way imply expression of any opinion concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities.

Kindly note that a copy of the letter is transmitted to the Government of Yemen.

Please accept, Sir, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Mary Lawlor
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Matthew Gillett
Vice-Chair of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

Gabriella Citroni
Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Irene Khan
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Margaret Satterthwaite
Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers