

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Ref.: AL OMN 1/2026
(Please use this reference in your reply)

16 January 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/4, 60/8, 52/9 and 59/4.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning **the judicial and administrative harassment against human rights defender Mr. Awad Al-Sawafi, in the form of repeated arrests and arbitrary detention since 2011 as well as his job demotion in 2024 on the basis of unknown security reasons.**

Awad Al-Sawafi is a human rights defender with a degree in law. He has joined peaceful public demonstrations and publicly spoke out against government corruption and in defence of the rights of detainees and of social and economic rights.

Oman's Penal Code, enacted in 2018, was the subject of a communication (OL [OMN 1/2018](#)) to your Excellency's Government expressing concern that the Code's vaguely defined provisions could unduly restrict the right to freedom of opinion and expression, in particular the rights of human rights defenders and online activists. We regret not receiving a reply from your Excellency's Government to this communication.

Concerns relating to the protection of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly were previously raised in a [statement](#) by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association at the conclusion of his visit to Oman in 2014, in which he noted that "Omani's Basic law guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, with the caveat that this right must be 'within the limits of the Law'", and that "Unfortunately, based on the information [...] gathered, these 'limits of the law' are quite restrictive, to the point where they often annul the essence of the right."

A number of communications were sent to your Excellency's Government concerning alleged acts of intimidation and reprisals against human rights defenders for cooperating with the Special Rapporteur during his country visit to Oman, including [OMN 1/2015](#), [OMN 5/2014](#), [OMN 3/2014](#) and [OMN 2/2014](#).

According to the information received:

Regarding the judicial harassment against Mr. Al-Sawafi

On 15 March 2011, security forces allegedly raided his home at night, arrested Mr. Al-Sawafi and took him by helicopter to the central prison's security department, where he was detained. The arrest occurred after he joined demonstrations in the town of Sohar, 260 km west of the capital Muscat, protesting the high unemployment rate and official corruption.

Around the end of April 2011, Mr. Al-Sawafi's detention was renewed in a closed court hearing, to which his lawyer was not allowed. He was held with no charge against him. About one month later, this time in the presence of his lawyer, Mr. Al-Sawafi was convicted of unlawful gathering and sentenced to three months in prison and fined with a sum of 1,000 Omani rial (around USD 2,700). He was released three months later, at the end of his term. During his incarceration, Mr. Al-Sawafi was allegedly subjected to psychological ill-treatment by security service officers who threatened to beat him or to enable a higher sentence against him, with the aim of obtaining information on the organisers of the demonstrations.

In July 2012, Mr. Al-Sawafi was arrested at his home.

On 8 August 2012, he was sentenced, in the presence of his lawyer, by a Muscat Court to 18 months in prison and a fine of 1,000 Omani rial (around USD 2,700), as a result of a Facebook post he published, in which he criticised the court sentences against the protestors of the 2011 demonstrations. He was charged with "criticising the Sultan" under Article 97 of the Omani Penal Code, which criminalised slander against the Sultan with punishments from six months to three years. The article was changed in 2018 to increase punishments to three to seven years. During his incarceration, Mr. Al-Sawafi was allegedly subjected to ill-treatment and held in isolation for ten days in a cell with no adequate toilet in an abandoned prison, where he was shackled, was allowed two meals day and had no adequate bedding. He was released after four months by a pardon from the Sultan.

On 12 March 2016, Mr. Al-Sawafi was arrested for the third time, and allegedly held without charge in isolation in the Muscat police headquarters for 19 days, ten days of which were spent in an open space consisting of high walls and a roof made of iron bars, which allowed no protection against the weather. He spent the rest of the 19 days in a narrow, dark cell. During this time, he went on a hunger strike. Following a meeting with a security officer, who allegedly warned him against talking about his detention, he was taken to the public prosecutor. He was then allegedly made to sign a confession stating that he had caused offense between the Syrian government and the government of the Sultanate of Oman through a tweet he posted, in which he wrote that "Syrian children are eating grass due to extreme hunger". He was subsequently released. The public prosecutor allegedly warned him that although his case was closed, it could be reopened at any time during the following three years, and he could be given longer sentences.

On 3 June 2020, Mr. Al-Sawafi was arrested for the fourth time at home, hours after his wife had a baby. Security forces reportedly followed him from the hospital. This happened after he posted a tweet in which he criticized the Public Prosecution for adopting a threatening tone in addressing citizens.

After around eight days, during which he was allegedly detained in isolation in a cold cell, he was taken to court and charged with using information technology in a way that could harm public order, under article 19 of Oman's Cyber Crime law issued by Royal Decree No. 12/2011 on 6 February 2011. He was given a suspended sentence, in the presence of his lawyer, of one year in prison, pending the enforcement of the full sentence, which has not so far taken place.

Regarding administrative harassment against Mr. Al-Sawafi

On 22 January 2014, Mr. Al-Sawafi was appointed as administrative affairs clerk in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (now Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries, and Water Resources), as a result of a Royal Decree released by the then ruler, Sultan Qaboos. Mr. Al-Sawafi had his own business, but allegedly due to veiled threats and security pressure, he felt obliged to accept the post. He was allowed to take leave to continue his studies; he graduated with a degree in law in 2019 and returned to his job in the Ministry.

On 23 September 2021, he was transferred by Ministerial Order No. 191/2021 to a clerical position in the legal affairs department and seconded by the same order to the post of legal researcher and commissioner representing the Ministry in judicial bodies. The new position did not become fixed as promotions had been stopped countrywide.

On 25 March 2024, Mr. Al-Sawafi received Administrative Order No. 38/2024, withdrawing Order No. 191/2021, effectively ending his post in the legal affairs department and transferring him to the human resources department, where he covered the post of an administrative clerk.

On 26 March 2024, Mr. Al-Sawafi complained about the decision to transfer him. He received a reply to his complaint from the Ministry of Agriculture's human resources department, stating that he had been removed from his position due to a lack of qualifications.

On 13 May 2024, Mr. Al-Sawafi raised a case in the Administrative Court against the Ministry of Agriculture, requesting a suspension in the implementation of Administrative Order No. 38/2024 while he was awaiting the court ruling, and to revert to the *status quo ante*.

On 30 June 2024, the Administrative Court ruled against Mr. Al-Sawafi, referring to security requirements leading to his transfer by quoting Omani Sultanate's Decree No. 99/91, which requires security clearance in any transfer or promotion in public employment, superseding any other priority. The court said that the Ministry of Agriculture had sought security approval on 2 February 2020 and that it had gone ahead with the transfer and the secondment on

23 September 2021, in contradiction with reservations expressed by the security services on 7 July 2020, which then questioned the Ministry on 15 February 2024. Following the Court ruling, the Ministry of Agriculture issued Order No. 38/2024, cancelling Mr. Al-Sawafi's post in the legal department and moving him back to his position as administrative clerk. No reason for the security service's reservations or evidence has been provided.

On 29 July 2024 Mr. Al-Sawafi appealed the Administrative Court's decision at the Court of Appeal. On 30 June 2025, the Court of Appeal upheld the decision of the Administrative Court.

On 7 August 2025, Mr. Al-Sawafi appealed at the Supreme Court. On 24 September 2025, the Supreme Court refused to accept the appeal.

Without wishing to prejudge the accuracy of the information received, we express serious concern at the repeated arrests and arbitrary detentions of human rights defender Mr. Awadh Al-Sawafi, the alleged lack of due process, and his alleged ill-treatment in detention, as well as the administrative harassment against him, including his demotion on security orders without clear evidence. We are concerned that these measures may have been taken in retaliation for his human rights defence work and the exercise of his rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, in the context of his participation to public demonstrations and social media posts.

If confirmed, the abovementioned allegations would appear to be in contravention with, among other norms, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Oman acceded on 10 November 2025; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Oman acceded on 9 June 2020; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Oman acceded to on 9 June 2020; and the Arab Charter on Human Rights, that Oman ratified on 21 March 2023. They would also violate the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rule) and are in contradiction with the principles set forth in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

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 be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide information on as to the legal and factual basis for the repeated arrests and detention of Mr. Al-Sawafi and explain how this is in line with due process guarantees, the Arab Charter on Human Rights, and provisions under international human rights law.

3. Please provide detailed information on any inquiry or investigation that may have been taken in connection with the allegations that Mr. Al-Sawafi was subjected to ill-treatment while in detention. If no such inquiry took place, please explain how this is compatible with the Arab Charter on Human Rights and with international human rights law.
4. Please provide detailed information as to the administrative demotion of Mr. Al-Sawafi based on security orders, and how this is compatible with Article 34 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which guarantee equality of opportunity without discrimination of any kind.
5. Please indicate what measures have been taken to ensure that Mr. Al-Sawafi and other human rights defenders and civil society organisations in Oman are able to carry out their peaceful and legitimate work, including the exercise of their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, 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 your Excellency's Government 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.

Further, we would like to inform your Excellency's Government that after having transmitted the information contained in the present communication to the Government, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention may also transmit the case through its regular procedure in order to render an opinion on whether the deprivation of liberty was arbitrary or not. The present communication in no way prejudices any opinion the Working Group may render. The Government is required to respond separately to the allegation letter and the regular procedure.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

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

Mary Lawlor
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

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

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

Gina Romero
Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which protects the right of everyone to maintain an opinion without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers and through any media.

The right to freedom of expression is also guaranteed by article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (ICCPR) acceded to by Oman on 25 November 2025, and by article 32 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights (ACHR), which Oman ratified by Royal Decree 16/2023 on 21 March 2023.

This rights, as enshrined under article 19 ICCPR, includes the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media”, applies online as well as offline and includes not only the exchange of information that is favourable, but also that which may criticize, shock, or offend. In its [general comment No 34](#), the Human Rights Committee stated that States parties to the ICCPR are required to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including “political discourse, commentary on one's own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse” (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 11).

The Committee further asserts that there is a duty of States to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression (para. 23). Recognizing how journalists and persons who engage in the gathering and analysis of information on the human rights situation and who publish human rights-related reports, including judges and lawyers, are frequently subjected to threats, intimidation and attacks because of their activities, the Committee stresses that “all such attacks should be vigorously investigated in a timely fashion, and the perpetrators prosecuted, and the victims, or, in the case of killings, their representatives, be in receipt of appropriate forms of redress” (para. 23).

Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be compatible with the requirements set out in article 19(3) ICCPR. Under these requirements, restrictions must (i) be provided by law; (ii) pursue one of the legitimate aims for restriction, which are the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals; and (iii) be necessary and proportionate for those objectives. The State has the burden of proof to demonstrate that any such restrictions are compatible with the Covenant, and restrictions must always be “the least intrusive instrument among those which might achieve their protective function” ([CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 34](#)).

With regard to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, we wish to refer your Excellency's Government to articles 20 of the UDHR, 24 of the ACHR and 21 of the ICCPR which guarantee the right to peaceful assembly with restrictions in conformity with the law as necessary in a democratic society.

Regarding the right to fair trial, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to articles 13 and 14 of the ACHR which guarantees that no one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest or detention. We would also like to point to article 9 of the ICCPR which guarantees that anyone arrested shall be immediately informed of the reasons for their arrest and of any charges against them, article 10 guaranteeing that all persons deprived of their liberty should be treated with humanity and respect, article 14 guaranteeing that they should have the right to a fair and public trial. Such rights are also provided for by articles 9, and 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in Rules 1 and 3 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

We further recall Oman's obligations under article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which it acceded to on 9 June 2020 and which guarantees "Equal opportunity for everyone to be promoted in his employment to an appropriate higher level, subject to no considerations other than those of seniority and competence," as well as article 34 of the ACHR which calls on the State to provide, to the extent possible, a job for the largest number of those willing to work, while ensuring "...equality of opportunity without discrimination of any kind on grounds of race, colour, sex, religion, language, political opinion, membership in a union, national origin, social origin, disability or any other situation."

Finally, we would like to recall 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 articles 1 and 2 which state that everyone has the right to promote and 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.

Furthermore, we would like to refer to the following articles of the Declaration:

- Article 5(a), which provides that everyone has the right, individually and in association with others to meet or assemble peacefully for the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- Article 6(b) and (c), which provide that everyone has the right to freely publish, impart or disseminate to others, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance, both in law and in practice, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to draw public attention to those matters.
- Article 12, which states the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration.