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**SPECIAL REPORT: Yemeni journalists and human rights defenders at risk during wartime**



Early in April, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution calling for the swift resumption of peace talks and an end to violence in Yemen. Yet fighting continued to rage across the country with Saudi airstrikes targeting Houthi forces over the past month at the expense of civilians, and Houthi forces targeting the individuals and groups working against them including the Saudi-led coalition. Saudi Arabia broke its 21 April promise to end the bombing campaign, which has reportedly left over 1000 dead and thousands more wounded and displaced, and there has not yet been a peaceful settlement. The UN Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, has resigned, and humanitarian access to the country remains limited. Although the presence of human rights defenders and their work documenting human rights violations is most needed in Yemen now, their lives are more at risk than ever, according to research outlined below and conducted by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR).

## Political Background

Tracking Yemen before and after 18 March 2011 – also known as Karama day (Dignity day) – and the constant protests of the Yemeni people since then, beginning during the wave of Arab uprisings in the region, it is apparent that it is now more dangerous than ever to be a human rights defender or journalist in this country.

The interim government in Yemen, while it was still somehow functional prior to the transition period, was deeply corrupt and those who sought to expose that corruption faced direct and often violent repercussions. In the present period of political transition, the situation is more complex and the dangers faced by those who report events and those who campaign for social justice are not only intensifying but also are increasingly unpredictable. After the recent conflict between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis one can see a dismantlement of international law, higher risks of collateral harm, and more focused attacks on the people who speak up against any type of violation committed by any side. These attacks range through assassinations and beatings, wide scale online campaigns of abuse and intimidation and the use of court processes to repress legitimate journalism.

The more than one month-long bombing campaign, which Saudi Arabia began on 25 March, leading to numerous civilian deaths, compounded the already fraught situation. “Pray with us for peace in my country Yemen and the world peace. My heart and soul are both bleeding for my country and the civilians that we have been losing for weeks on a daily basis since the armed strikes were launched on Yemen,” said **Amal Basha**, Chairwoman of the Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF).

Currently, basic safety and security measures have become even less attainable. “In Yemen, no space is safe anymore. The mosque bombing is a clear example of that. Many people would argue that such a holy space would be the last place one would see such tragedy. [However, it seems] the most comfortable, safe spaces are turning violent with a shocking speed,” stated **Roaj Alwazir**, media co-founder of #SupportYemen, in an interview with GCHR.

“We hold on to anyone who gives us hope, and the situation now is imposing that we hold on to ourselves only and be everything we might need while all what we have known and all what we used to hold on to is being torn down,” said **Jamila Ghaleb**, a Yemeni human rights activist and writer.

## Media Freedom Suffers as Journalists Targeted

Media freedom has been compromised during the conflict, with little media neutrality, and electricity outages mean online sources of independent news are not always available. Alwazir said, “Yemen’s fragmented government, old and new powers, are improperly using their leverage over media to limit critical thinking and public debate. There is a very weak independent media scene and those who try to dispute and expose, end up in jail. Long-time journalist, whistle-blower **Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani** was assassinated for exercising his right to speak and write and the ongoing acts of violence on journalists is a troubling pattern we continue to see.”

On 18 March, armed men riding on a motorbike gunned down Al-Khaiwani, a journalist and former editor-in-chief of the pro-democracy online newspaper [Al-Shoura](#), in a store near his house, apparently in retaliation for his critical writing. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has claimed responsibility for the crime. (For more information on Al-Khaiwani see: <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/952>)

The murder of Al-Khaiwani highlights the threats facing journalists and human rights defenders daily. Many journalists have been kidnapped this year and held incommunicado, reports the Yemen Journalists' Syndicate (YJS), including **Mahmoud Taha**, kidnapped on 3 April by armed Houthi groups in Imran province. Taha had reportedly been receiving threats from Houthis.

According to YJS, many media outlets were shut down and journalists and media workers temporarily detained. On 26 March, armed Houthi forces in Sanaa stormed the headquarters of "Al-Masdar" newspaper and kidnapped journalists **Sami Noaman, Ahmed Al-Wali** and **Murad Al-Arifi** and took them to an unknown location. They were later released. Houthis also stormed Al-Jazeera's office and destroyed the surveillance camera and looted the contents of the office. They did the same for a number of other private and political broadcasters, and blocked online news sites that were critical of Houthi actions.

The day before the raids, according to Freedom Foundation for Media Freedom, Rights & Development in Yemen, the Houthi-run Ministry of Information, had warned the media that it would take action against any media outlet that opposed their policies, and "that these measures may amount to the closure of any media outlet working to stir up unrest." Freedom Foundation reports that since the Houthis took control of Sana'a on 21 September 2015, they have committed many severe violations and attacks against media. "Press freedom and freedom of expressions faced serious deterioration unprecedented since the start of political pluralism in the country in 1990," noted the NGO.

Media outlets have strongly sided with either parts of the conflict. In an interview with Jamila Ghaleb, she pointed out that media outlets have constant biases. "The only places you can find independent and objective news as well as opinions are on Facebook pages of independent HRDs".

In parallel, Amal Basha expressed: "Media is under a locked siege especially when dealing with human rights issues. They try, by all means to silence Yemeni people, especially Yemeni human rights defenders." She continued, "I am in denial of what is actually happening, especially that I am stuck outside my country, and even if I could come back, I will be killed just like Abdulkarim [Al-Khaiwani.]"

### **Human Rights Defenders at Risk**

Human rights defenders active in the human rights field in Yemen are under threat every single day. Whether targeted by the various sides of the internal conflict or the external attacks, HRDs have been treated as though they were taking part in the conflict, even while simply exercising their rights to freedom of expression or their right to simply have an opinion and defend human rights.

For example, it's been months that journalist and human rights defender **Samia Al-Aghbari** has been receiving threats and exposed to campaigns of harassment and offensive language. She has also been accused of belonging to Da'esh (Islamic State) after expressing her opinions criticizing Houthi actions due to the pressures and threats they've been sending towards her. As a result, she took down her Facebook page temporarily. She almost always goes out wearing a Niqab to cover her face in order to protect herself by hiding her identify. Several threats have been written publicly against her on Facebook, such as: "I swear to God that slaughtering you would be a promenade, don't get your

ugly face out.” Al-Aghbari’s case highlights how the Yemeni people’s right to freedom of expression is being suppressed by all sides. She is one of a number of female journalists and activists who have constantly been accused of blasphemy or being a “nonbeliever” by extremists due to simply expressing certain ideas as a result of her political beliefs and activities.

Many of the attacks against her were posted on Yemen’s Brotherhood Facebook page in addition to other pages that belong to some people who have influence in Yemen. It is worth mentioning that the Brotherhood Facebook page is linked to some members of the Yemeni Al-Islah party.

“Whoever stands against them, they will accuse him or her of blasphemy and spoil their careers and reputations, in order to make society react negatively to what journalists and activists write or say,” said Al-Aghbari. She added that, “There is a systematic campaign against every woman who doesn’t wish to idly subject to others’ thoughts.”

Other women human rights defenders are also constantly threatened via social media or phone and subjected to smear campaigns, like **Majda Al-Haddad**, who recently fled the country following numerous threats. In 2012, she was attacked by a man in her home who covered her mouth with his hands but fled after her children responded to her screams. Since the takeover of the Houthi rebels in the capital Sanaa, she says that human rights defenders, protestors and journalists “are being threatened, kidnapped and tortured by some government officials,” as well as by other non-state actors.

Last year, Al-Haddad and the activist **Adnan Madani** were working together on a campaign they initiated against the corruption in the Ministry of Electricity and traders of energy and they had been publishing documents, organizing several stands, protests and sit-ins in order that the government would stop signing contracts for the purchase of energy. Because of this campaign they were continuously threatened with prosecution. Madani, who stayed in Yemen, suffered from an acid attack, which resulted in the loss of sight in one eye.

Men and women human rights defenders alike have been putting themselves and their families in danger for the sake of reporting on situations in Yemen. **Mohamad Al-Absi** for example, is a well-known Yemeni journalist. Unidentified gunmen in Sanaa recently raided his house, in which his family resides, while he was away in Egypt. Al-Absi had spoken about the economic and political situation in Yemen on Sky News Arabia before the raid. Earlier in 2012, Al-Absi was accused of defamation because of an article he wrote on corruption and mismanagement within Yemeni civil society. These types of threats can silence human rights defenders who have the right to be protected while exercising their right to freedom of expression.

The current situation in Yemen in terms of the behaviour of certain groups and individuals towards whomever makes their opinions known, is impairing and ruining the journalists’ and activists’ reputations, and especially women’s. This will continue unless effective procedures against hate speech and defamation are put in place as many human rights defenders, including journalists and bloggers are facing death and risk of attacks on a daily basis.

Internal clashes have made big and drastic changes to the human rights conditions within the country, but what’s even worse is the external threat anyone is prone to be targeted by. Human rights defender **Alia Al-Shaabi** has constantly showed concern about the extremity of the chaotic targeting

of the Saudi-led bombing of many civilians in several schools and religious premises, which encompass a list of violations in terms of international human rights law. The situation is risky on all fronts and human rights defenders are feeling almost helpless; but still constantly trying to find steps that could lead to conflict resolution and peace building, even at a time where their own family members have been killed. One Yemeni human rights defender stated to GCHR in a private interview: "My brother was killed. But I still try and negotiate for a better future with the same people who killed him."

**Recommendations:**

"We want our local powers to address the discourse of peace and negotiations. Forces in Yemen should keep encouraging peace talks. Our struggle is not to feed conflicts but to mitigate and resolve conflicts. And women's participation in such negotiations is key," said **Wameedh Shaker**, a national gender consultant and Yemeni human rights defender.

In March, Arab civil society groups at a workshop on Gender Sensitive Non-Violence in Cyprus, called on the Arab League and members states to "Ensure the return of all parties to the negotiation table to agree on a peaceful political solution, with a meaningful participation of women, and to abide by the Outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, and UNSC's resolutions regarding the Yemeni transitional period." They asked for support to "Prioritise the safety of the Yemeni people, protect their lives, property, and their social fabric, and take into account the deteriorating humanitarian situation for civilians. It is expected that the humanitarian crisis will only get worse as the attacks continue." See: <https://www.womenpeacemakersprogram.org/news/statement-arab-ngos-call-for-immediate-stop-of-military-attacks-on-yemen/>

There has been an overwhelming failure by the transitional government and the international community to prevent and investigate the attacks against human rights defenders effectively or prosecute the perpetrators who were behind these attacks. GCHR calls on the international community to support Yemeni human rights defenders in order to keep them safe from harm or death.

**Furthermore, GCHR also calls on all those who are party to the conflict in Yemen to:**

- 1) Stop the ongoing war, protect civilians and start negotiations as soon as possible;
- 2) Respect freedom of expression from all sides of the conflict;
- 3) Free all detained human rights defenders and guarantee the safety of journalists; and
- 4) Carry out an immediate, impartial and thorough investigation into the murder of Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani and all other crimes committed against human rights in Yemen with a view to bringing those responsible to justice in line with local laws and international standards.