

March 25, 2020 12:00AM EDT

Available In English العربية Français

Yemen: Saudi Forces Torture, ‘Disappear’ Yemenis

At Least 5 Detainees from al-Mahrah Illegally Transferred to Saudi Arabia



An anti-Saudi-led coalition rally by Houff district (مديرية خوف) residents in al-Mahrah, May 4, 2019. © 2019 Private

(Beirut) – [Saudi](#) military forces and Saudi-backed [Yemeni](#) forces have carried out serious abuses against Yemenis since June 2019 in al-Mahrah, Yemen’s far eastern governorate, Human Rights Watch said today. The abuses include arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances, and illegal transfer of detainees to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi and Saudi-backed forces have arbitrarily arrested demonstrators protesting the presence of Saudi forces, as well as other local residents not connected with the protests, in al-Mahrah’s capital al-Ghaydah, residents told Human Rights Watch. Former detainees said that they were accused of supporting opponents of Saudi Arabia, interrogated, and tortured at an informal detention facility at the city’s airport in which Saudi officers supervise pro-Saudi Yemeni forces. Detainees’ families said that Saudi forces forcibly disappeared at least five detainees for three to five months while illegally transferring them to Saudi Arabia and not providing information on their whereabouts.

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

Human Rights Watch interviewed four former Yemeni detainees, two family members of detainees, and four friends of detainees, as well as seven Yemeni activists, five journalists, four officials with Yemen’s internationally recognized government, and a Houthi official about recent events in al-Mahra. Human Rights Watch also reviewed a document signed by the Yemeni government’s “secretary general for political security” for al-Mahrah about the detention of a person in al-Ghaydah airport and a short video in which a badly bruised man describes being arbitrarily detained and tortured at the airport prison. Activists provided names and photos of six detainees they said were forcibly moved to Saudi Arabia.

Human Rights Watch documented the cases of 16 people whom Saudi and allied Yemeni forces arbitrarily detained in al-Mahrah governorate between June 2019 and February 2020. Saudi security forces moved 11 of the 16 to Saudi Arabia. Five of them were moved in June to a prison in Abha, the capital of Asir province, after which families learned their whereabouts, their family members said. Before their transfer, the families received no information about their whereabouts for three to five months. The other six were men from northern Yemen arrested while crossing the border from Oman back into Yemen after receiving medical treatment there, said an al-Mahrah activist and two Houthi sources. The Saudis have released the other five whom they did not transfer to Saudi Arabia. A source also told Human Rights Watch that Omani forces detained a Yemeni man near the Omani border in September 2019, before releasing him after 10 days in detention. However, in a written response to Human Rights Watch, the Omani government denied that there are any Omani forces in Yemen, and that allegations of rights abuses by its forces in Yemen are “baseless.”

Four officials of the internationally recognized Yemeni government of President Abd Rabbo Mansur Hadi, former detainees and activists told Human Rights Watch that Saudi officers and Saudi-backed Yemeni forces are running an informal detention facility in al-Ghaydah airport in al-Mahrah. A document bearing a stamp of President Hadi’s office, dated April 2019, and reviewed by Human Rights Watch, refers to the detention there of a person arrested by the “central apparatus for political security,” Yemen’s domestic intelligence service.

Four former detainees said that Saudi officers were present during their detention and interrogation at *the* airport facility. Three said Yemeni officers tortured them, in the presence of Saudi officers, to compel them to sign pledges to cease protests against the activities of Saudi forces and their Yemeni allies in al-Mahrah and stop cooperating with Saudi Arabia’s opponents.

Human Rights Watch wrote to Rajeh Bakrit, governor of al-Mahrah, before he was [replaced](#) by Mohammed Yasser on February 26, 2020. Human Rights Watch also wrote to Yemen’s minister of human rights, Mohammed Asker; the Saudi-led coalition’s spokesperson, Turki al-Malki; and the Saudi

foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah, inquiring about alleged abuses committed by their forces in al-Mahrah. At the time of writing they had not responded.

Saudi forces in Yemen are obligated to abide by international humanitarian law and international human rights law. They must treat people taken into custody for security reasons humanely, and if they detain someone on suspicion of committing a criminal offense, transfer them to the custody of the Yemeni government for investigation and prosecution. Torture or transfer to torture is strictly prohibited, as is enforced disappearance, the detention of someone without reporting their status or whereabouts. International humanitarian law prohibits (Geneva IV, art. 49) the transfer of detained civilians from their country to another state, such as Saudi Arabia.

“The Saudi and Yemeni governments should immediately release any Yemenis wrongfully detained or transferred to Saudi Arabia and investigate alleged torture and enforced disappearance by their forces in al-Mahrah,” Page said. “The UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen should also investigate these abuses, with a view to holding those responsible to account.”



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Al-Mahrah Governorate

Al-Mahrah governorate is in Yemen’s far east, bordering Oman and Saudi Arabia. It is remote from the areas of heavy fighting between the Saudi-led coalition, which entered Yemen in March 2015 to support the Yemeni government led by Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi against Houthi forces from northern Yemen, who had taken control of the capital, Sanaa, and much of the rest of the country.

Oman was the only Arab state in the Gulf region that did not join the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates-led military operations against Houthi forces. In a 2017 report, the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen detailed the [transfer of weapons from Oman](#) through al-Mahrah to territory under the control of the Houthis and their allies. By late 2017, Saudi Arabia began deploying forces into al-Mahrah governorate and in November took control of the *airport in al-Ghaydah*.

At least since 2016, the Yemeni and Saudi governments have backed a “military police” security unit in al-Mahrah governorate. The UAE unsuccessfully attempted to create a so-called [Mahri Elite Force](#), similar to units it had established in Hadramut and Shabwah governorates as part of its “counter-terrorism efforts” in Yemen, which have led to rampant [abuses](#).

The UN Panel of Experts on Yemen noted in 2018 that [Saudi Arabia deployed](#) its 123rd Infantry Brigade security unit to al-Ghaydah in November 2017 to improve security along this main supply route for commercial and other traffic. Former detainees, families of detainees, and activists in al-Mahrah repeatedly mentioned “military police” and “special forces,” along with the Saudi-led coalition and Saudi-supported Yemeni forces, as responsible for the documented abuses. Yemenis interviewed by Human Rights Watch used “Saudi” and “coalition” interchangeably to describe the security forces in al-Mahrah.

Beginning in May 2018, Yemeni community leaders in al-Mahrah organized peaceful demonstrations against the presence of Saudi forces, eventually establishing a group they called “[the committee of peaceful sit-in](#).” [Pro-Saudi](#) media and the United Kingdom newspaper *The Independent* alleged that the [Omani government has provided financial support](#) to the committee.

During a demonstration in [November 2018](#), pro-Saudi Yemeni forces dispersed protesters in al-Mahrah’s al-Anfaq area (منطقة الأنفاق) with live bullets, the sit-in committee told Human Rights Watch. Unconfirmed accounts by four officials from the internationally recognized Yemeni government of President Abd Rabbo Mansur Hadi, activists, and local [press reports](#) said that the Yemeni forces allied with Saudi Arabia killed at least two protesters and wounded another during that protest.

In [April](#) and [August](#) 2019, Saudi warplanes carried out airstrikes against checkpoints set up by al-Mahrah residents, according to residents and local press reports. No casualties were reported. On [February 17, 2020](#), clashes erupted after residents prevented the entrance of Saudi forces in Shahan district’s Fujit area, according to [local media](#). A message from the sit-in committee spokesperson to Human Rights Watch said that at least one protester was wounded. According to the [Saudi-led coalition spokesperson](#), some members of the government security forces were also injured in the clashes.

In September 2018, President Hadi’s government reportedly issued an [arrest warrant for Ali bin Salem al-Huraizy](#), al-Mahrah governorate’s former deputy governor and one of the founders of the sit-in committee. Al-Huraizy, who has not been arrested, told Human Rights Watch that the government accused him of destabilizing the region with calls for protests against the Saudi-led forces.

Arbitrary Arrest and Torture

Three former detainees said that Yemeni local forces supervised by Saudi officers abused and tortured them inside a detention facility in the airport in al-Ghaydah, subjecting them to beatings, electric shocks, and threats to harm their family members. The three former detainees said they were accused of ties with Lebanese Hezbollah and ties to Qatar, which has been in a prolonged [diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and the UAE](#) since June 2017. All of those interviewed are identified with pseudonyms for their protection.

A former detainee, “Bassem,” a journalist, said that local Yemeni forces allied with Saudi Arabia detained him in early July 2019 for about two months in al-Ghaydah. They took him to the local

criminal investigation police headquarters (*al-Bahth al-Jinai*) (البحث الجنائي) for a few hours, he said, then to the airport, handing him over to Yemeni security forces and their Saudi commander. His Yemeni captors, “with the approval of the Saudi officers,” he said, kept him blindfolded, beat him, tortured him using electric shocks, and threatened to transfer him to a prison in Riyadh:

The Saudi and Yemeni security men forced me to sign a pledge to not do journalism work in al-Mahrah and not to communicate with ‘Iran-allied’ Shi’ite Hezbollah, Qatar, or Oman. I was angry. I went on hunger strike for a whole week demanding they hand me over to the public prosecution, but in the end they forced me to eat. At this stage, I realized I was in a prison run by the Saudi army in al-Ghaydah civilian airport and I heard a man scream in pain under torture in the next room. After a few days, they moved me to another prison in an unknown military base. In this prison, no jailer was Yemeni. No one. Zero. They all spoke with Saudi dialects.

Bassem said that interrogators told him that if he didn’t confess about his alleged links with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Qatar, and to the Houthis and Omani intelligence services, they would behead his younger brother, whom they had also detained. Bassem said he was later transferred to several detention centers: “I had inadequate food, and the last cell I was in was like a garbage dump.” He said he managed to escape in late August by digging a tunnel underneath the wall of the container in which he was confined.

“Hassan,” another journalist, said that Yemeni armed men with their faces covered abducted him from his hotel room in al-Ghaydah in mid-July 2019 and took him by car to the criminal investigation detention center, then to the airport prison, and finally to a place he was unable to identify. He said that throughout his detention, which lasted more than a month, his captors tortured him, using electric shocks, and beat him repeatedly. After his release, he tried to obtain surveillance camera footage from the hotel, but he learned from the hotel’s receptionists that the armed men who abducted him had disposed of the footage to prevent them from being identified.

“Farouq,” one of the protesters who had joined the sit-ins protesting the Saudi presence in al-Mahrah, said Yemeni security forces arrested him in June 2019 as he was passing by the airport. He was interrogated in the detention center there, first by pro-Saudi Yemeni forces and then by a Saudi officer. He said:

I was interrogated in a room by a member of the Saudi military. His military clothes and accent showed that he was Saudi. The officer himself told me that he was Saudi. He also told me that in the room there was a camera filming me and they can watch me live in Riyadh. He said that they knew who I was because they filmed me in the demonstrations and recognized my face. They tried to force me to sign a pledge that I, and anyone from my family like my siblings, wouldn’t participate in any anti-coalition activities. I refused to sign because, as I told them, our demonstrations were peaceful. The officer was verbally abusive. They took my phone at the gate so I couldn’t call my family all that time, for about two to three hours.

A source close to prominent tribal groups in al-Mahrah also informed Human Rights Watch of a case in which Omani guards in al-Mahrah’s Shahen district (منطقة شحن), near the Oman border, arbitrarily detained a Yemeni man in September 2019 after he refused to join anti-Saudi efforts in al-Mahrah. Omani authorities released him after 10 days. Oman denied allegations of any abuses by Omani forces in a written response to Human Rights Watch, and moreover denied the presence of any Omani forces operating in Yemen.

Forced Disappearances and Illegal Transfers from Yemen

Four Yemeni government officials, as well as three relatives of detainees and seven activists, said that Saudi Arabia arbitrarily detained and then illegally transferred at least five Yemeni detainees into Saudi Arabia.

The mother of one detainee said that Yemeni military police arrested her son in June 2019 at al-Ghaydah airport when he went there to register and find work as a guard. They later transferred him to a prison in Abha, the capital of Asir province in Saudi Arabia. She said she had no word of him for three months, and only found out where he was when he phoned her from Saudi Arabia and told her his location. The son remains in detention without charge.

Another mother told Human Rights Watch that Yemeni security forces detained her husband and their two sons in al-Ghaydah in June 2019. Saudi officials then transferred them to a prison in Abha. She said she knew about the location of her husband and sons only after they called her from the prison in Abha after five months. The three remain in detention without charge.

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