

# Human Rights Watch

## Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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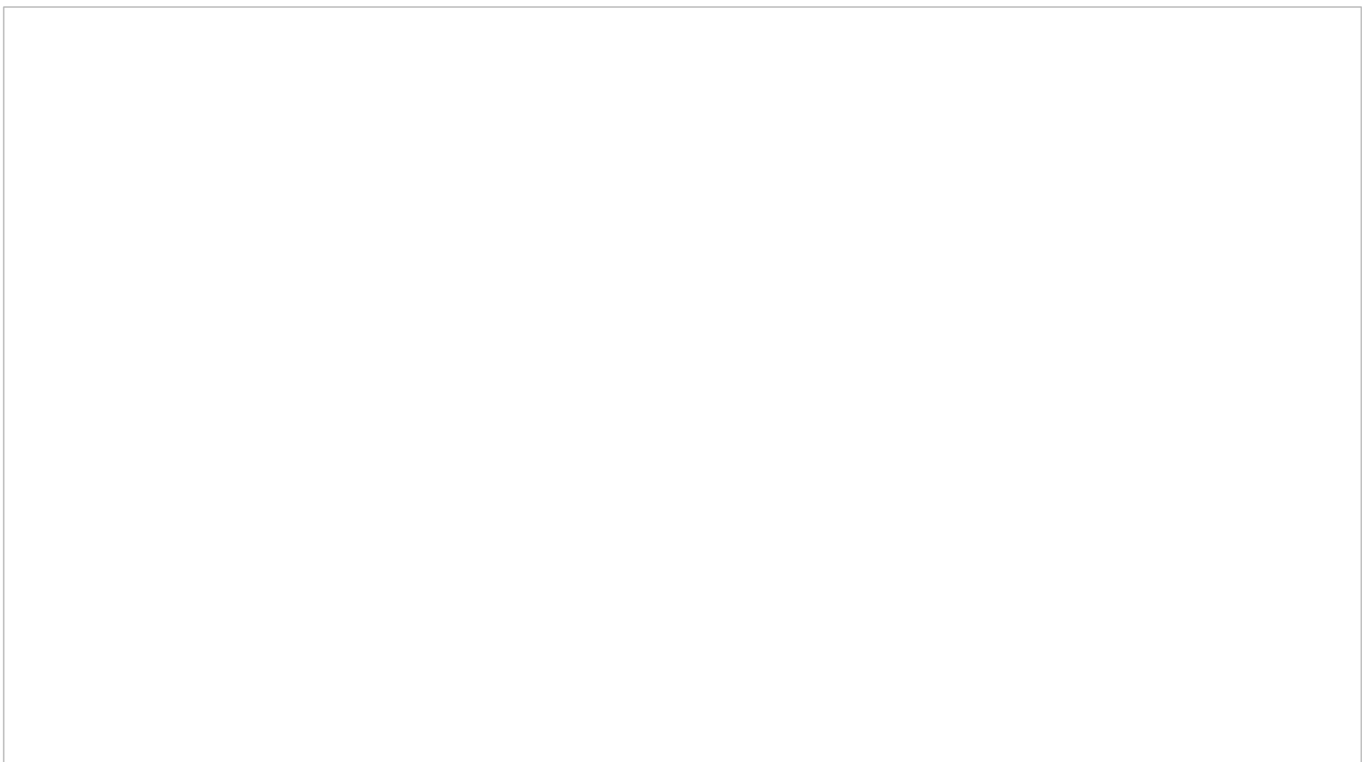
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The Houthis have added profiteering to their long list of abuses and offenses against the people under their control in Yemen, said [Sarah Leah Whitson](#), Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. Rather than treat detainees humanely, some Houthi officials are exploiting their power to turn a profit through detention, torture, and murder.

Since late 2014, when Houthi forces occupied the capital, Sanaa, and much of Yemen, Human Rights Watch has documented dozens of [cases of the Houthis](#) and forces loyal to the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh [carrying out arbitrary](#) and [abusive detention](#), as well as forced disappearances and torture. Yemeni rights groups have documented hundreds more cases. Human Rights Watch recently interviewed 14 former detainees and relatives of two other men detained or disappeared.

Houthi officials have treated detainees brutally, often amounting to torture, Human Rights Watch said. Former detainees described Houthi officers beating them with iron rods, wooden sticks, and assault rifles. Guards whipped prisoners, shackled them to walls, caned their feet, and threatened to rape them or their family members, former detainees said. Several people described being hung from a wall by their arms shackled behind them as one of the most painful techniques. In many cases, Houthi officials tortured them to obtain information or confessions.



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Former detainees described Houthi officers beating them with iron rods, wooden sticks, and assault rifles. 2018 John Holmes for Human Rights Watch

Former detainees said guards refused detainees medical assistance or treatment after abuse. Those released and their family members reported physical and psychological health complications from mistreatment.

Houthi officials regularly extort those detained and their relatives, said former detainees, family members, and Yemeni rights activists. In some cases, the Houthis ultimately released the detainee often they have not.

The wife of a man arrested by unidentified men in late 2015 said: At the beginning, I didn't know that he was arrested. They kidnapped him, but my family and I were looking for him everywhere. We asked at hospitals, police stations. They later learned he was held at the Houthi-controlled Political Security Office, a notorious intelligence agency, in Sanaa. I was following up with Houthi mediators for five months, and they were taking money, she said. Every time they give me promises with no result. I spoke to many Houthi leaders. They say they will do this and that, but they do nothing.

She has paid Houthi officials about 1.5 million Yemeni riyals over the last three years. Her husband remains detained. The UN Panel of Experts on Yemen found that Political Security Office members were profiting from detentions.

The sister of a man who disappeared in Hajjah governorate while looking for a job in 2016 said it was more than six months before a friend told her he had been detained. She contacted a Houthi official, who asked for guarantees. The family paid 100,000 riyals and her brother was released a month later. She said her brother had changed after his detention: He is not as he used to be. Signs of psychological disturbance appeared on him, he talks to himself, sometimes he keeps saying Why do they beat me?, talking to himself. I don't know what he saw, or what they did to him, during his disappearance.

Former detainees described terrible conditions in Houthi custody: poor hygiene; limited access to toilets, causing some to defecate on themselves; and lack of food and health care. Former detainees and family members said many formal and all informal detention facilities refused access to family members. Detainees had no defined process for challenging their detention or reporting mistreatment. In many cases documented, Houthi authorities moved detainees between facilities both formal and informal without notifying family members.

The Association of Mothers of Abductees, Yemeni women who advocate for their detained or disappeared civilian relatives, sent Human Rights Watch accounts from 10 cases in which Houthi officials had demanded money as a condition for release. Nine families paid. Houthi officials released only three of the men, including one in a prisoner exchange for Houthi fighters.

When committed in the context of an armed conflict, cruel treatment, torture, and humiliating or degrading treatment are war crimes. Taking hostages seizing someone or detaining them and threatening to kill, injure, or continue to detain them to compel a third party to do or abstain from doing something as a condition of release or for the persons safety is a war crime under the statute of the International Criminal Court.

The United Arab Emirates, UAE proxies, and Yemeni government forces have also arbitrarily detained, tortured, and forcibly disappeared scores of people in the Yemeni conflict.

In 2018, the UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen concluded the Houthis had committed acts that may amount to war crimes, including cruel treatment and torture [and] outrages upon personal dignity. The experts documented the Houthis detaining students, human rights defenders, journalists, perceived political opponents and members of the Bahai community, and mistreating and torturing detainees, including at the National Security Bureau and Political Security Office. The experts also found Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and UAE forces credibly implicated in detainee-related abuse that might amount to war crimes.

Human Rights Watch wrote to the Sanaa-based Interior Ministry on September 12 regarding preliminary findings and requesting further information on what steps, if any, the ministry had taken to hold people implicated in abuse accountable. The ministry has not responded.

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[Letter to Major General Abdulhakeem al-Maweri on Treatment of Detainees](#)

Houthi authorities should promptly release those held arbitrarily, end forced disappearances, and credibly investigate and punish those responsible for torture and hostage taking. Should they fail to do so, the UN Security Council should impose targeted sanctions on people who bear the greatest responsibility for detention-related abuses, including as a matter of command responsibility.

Yemen should urgently join the International Criminal Court, which would allow for possible prosecution of serious crimes by all parties to the conflict.

Yemenis taken into custody are suffering terribly, whether at the hands of the Houthis, the UAE forces, or government forces, Whitson said. UN officials and influential governments should press the warring parties to treat detainees humanely and release anyone being held arbitrarily.

### Houthi Torture and Hostage-Taking

### ***Judge Abdo al-Zubaidi, Sanaa***

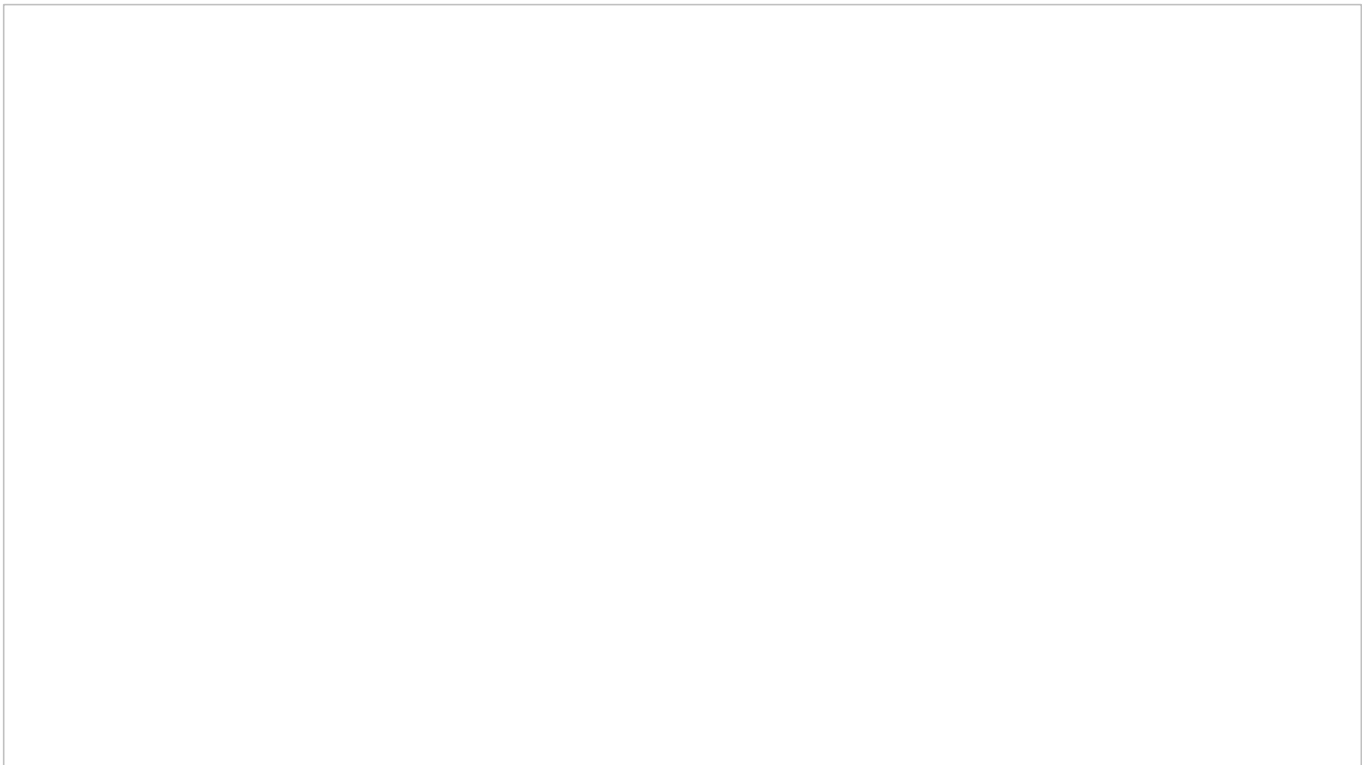
In early 2016, armed masked men in civilian clothes surrounded Judge Abdo al-Zubaidi, a military court judge in his late fifties, as he left his office with his 17-year-old son, who had come to pick him up. The men took al-Zubaidi's phone and put him and his son in a car. Another man drove their car, al-Zubaidi said: I saw the car going through the concrete security barriers of the PSO [Political Security Office].

The men separated father and son. A guard later told al-Zubaidi his son was out. He thought his son had been released. He later learned the Political Security officials [had detained and tortured him](#).

Interrogators told al-Zubaidi to confess that he was the head of the anti-Houthi resistance in Sanaa and was planning a coup. He refused. He said he was blindfolded, handcuffed, dragged down stairs, and pushed into a tiny dark room. A guard said he would be allowed to use the bathroom once a day and gave him an empty water bottle to use in the meantime. I was shocked, I am a judge, he said. I uphold the law... I put guilty people in jail. This is not even a prison. It is a grave.

I guess they didn't like my answer, I was cuffed and they whipped me with thick, cable wire on my legs, my hands and my back. They threw me down on the ground first, then over a table, then they brought a rigid cushion and put it between my hands where the cuffs are, and they start pulling it. Then they started to beat me with a wire over my fingers. They whipped me around 50 times until I didn't feel my hands. I still suffer from that until now. All that was bearable. But then they took off the cuffs and handcuffed me behind my back, and they hung the cuffs to one of the windows, I think something higher off the ground and they start pulling my handcuffed hands away from the back, and up. That was the worst thing I felt in my life.

Al-Zubaidi said he thought his hands, arms, and shoulders were going to be ripped from his body. He said he would write and sign whatever they wanted. It was only a few minutes, al-Zubaidi said, but the most difficult minutes ever of my life. He made up stories that he was working with the Yemeni president and senior officials, telling the Saudi-led coalition supporting the government where to strike. When they hung me, I felt I will die, so I told them what they wanted. They interrogated him for a week but did not torture him again.



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Houthi officials have treated detainees brutally, often amounting to torture. Former detainees described being hung from a wall by their arms shackled behind them as one of the most painful techniques. 2018 John Holmes for Human Rights Watch

At one point, al-Zubaidi gave them the name of a man he had read about who he thought was in Saudi Arabia. Ten days later, the guards brought al-Zubaidi to an interrogation room, where they had the man, who was blindfolded. The guards ordered Al-Zubaidi to talk about the man's involvement in anti-Houthi efforts. When he refused, they threatened to kill him. A few days later, al-Zubaidi again denied his previous confession. The men hung him for hours from a metal window with his arms cuffed in front of him. He said the position was slightly more bearable.

A few weeks later, Yemen's Specialized Criminal Court ordered al-Zubaidi's release due to lack of evidence. But the intelligence officers continued holding him and about a week later, took him to the prosecutors' office, where he was shown a video of himself confessing. He said his confession was a result of torture. The court again ordered his release. The intelligence officials refused.

In June 2017, al-Zubaidi was taken out of his cell to meet Maj. Gen. Abdul Qader al-Shami, then the acting Political Security Office chief and now the chief of the agency. Al-Zubaidi's relatives had blocked the roads to protest his detention, including stopping commercial trucks traveling to Sanaa. The officials wanted them to stop. A few days later, a prosecutor again recommended Al-Zubaidi's release and a judge approved it. Then, after over 450 days in detention, al-Zubaidi was released. I went home, ate a meal, and immediately fled the city.

***Dr. Marwan, Hodeida***

In 2015 Dr. Marwan, in his late twenties, whose real name and some others are withheld for their safety, treated a man outside the hospital where he worked. He said the man was a prisoner with gunshot wounds whom the Houthis had left at the side of the road after he was refused medical treatment elsewhere.

In mid-2016, armed men came to the hospital asking for Dr. Marwan. The men pulled him away from a patient he was treating, blindfolded him, and drove him away. They put him in a room that smelled of urine. He said an interrogator pulled his tie, slapped him, and accused him of being a Daashi [terrorist] doctor. He told the guards to take good care of him.

The guards accused him of working with the opposition because he had treated the patient in 2015 and hit him with iron rods on the soles of his feet. Marwan told them that treating the patient was his duty as a doctor. One of the guards kicked me in my face while I was talking. I was still wearing the white coat.

The second day, the guards hung him by his cuffed arms and with pliers began removing his fingernails... He kept losing consciousness, but they poured water over him and continued.

He remained there for 20 days, then was transferred to the Hodeida citadel, which the Houthis used as an informal detention facility. The guards took him to a tiny room containing what he called an aggregation of waste, and left him shackled to the wall for many days. Even the guards who came to feed him hurried because of the smell, he said.

The guards eventually moved Marwan to a new cell, then used electro-shock on him. After about a week, he was put in a room with other detainees, including a 13-year-old boy. He saw that one had an infected leg wound and asked a guard if he could treat the man. The guards beat him and put him back in the small room with the waste for a day as punishment.

One day guards took him to the small room to check on another prisoner. He was shackled to the chain on the wall, Marwan said. It was obvious he had been dead for a long time. The guards beat Marwan, saying they would kill him if he spoke about what he had seen.

The Houthis transferred all the prisoners to the Central Prison in Hodeida. Officers told them they would be released, but they remained detained. They began a hunger strike. A few days later, a Houthi official came and his men began shooting at the detainees after one resisted being taken with them. Marwan said four were wounded, and one never returned to the cell. The Houthis claimed they had released him.

After about 15 months, Marwan was released in late 2017 after his family paid 3 million riyals to Houthi officials. His family only learned he was alive about five months after he disappeared, after another recently released detainee told them he had been held with Marwan. Marwan said he had stopped practicing medicine and joined the Yemeni government army.

#### ***Saleem, Hodeida and Sanaa***

In early 2015, Saleem, a 45-year-old teacher, father of eight, and imam at a local mosque, went with his eldest son to pray. At least five vehicles, including three military trucks, surrounded the mosque. Two dozen men entered. One told Saleem the Houthis wanted to see him. He refused to leave. The men in the mosque and Houthi forces began fighting. The armed men beat people with the rifle butts. He said the men hit him in the back of the head and he fell unconscious.

His family did not know where he was. We were very scared, his wife said. After three days, the family learned he was at the Political Security Office in Hodeida. Guards initially refused to let his family visit, but later allowed them to visit twice a week.

At one point, an officer told them Saleem was very sick and was in a hospital. About 10 days later, armed men burst into the hospital room at night. His wife, who was with him, said:

I asked the hospital to call for the doctor to come urgently. The doctor came. He said to them the patient cant tolerate being outside the hospital, it is risky. But the armed men said, We are going to move [him] to another, better hospital. They took him in a wheelchair, and we didnt know where.

Hospital staff later told his wife the hospital had been surrounded by at least four military trucks and many armed men. A few days later, Saleem was moved back to the Political Security Office. In 2017, his wife said, We paid money to mediators to speak to some Houthi leaders We go from Abu Something to Abu Something and we pay here and there, and all of it is debts I have eight kids. In early 2018, Saleem was released after his family paid 10 million riyals to the Houthis, a lawyer following the case said.

#### ***Nasser, Sanaa***

Houthis arrested Nasser in late 2015. He said he was mistreated and held at multiple locations but was never charged. He was first held at a military camp in Sanaa, where the guards beat him every day:

I remember this way of beating, they tied my legs, and my hands, then they pulled me hanging from my hands, then three to four men started beating me. They used the cables and rubber pipe to lash me, [while] others used their fists and kicked with their feet.

The men ordered him to say where a prominent family he had worked for before the war had stored money and weapons. They tied him to a tree exposed to airstrikes and told him if he died, they would blame it on the Saudi-led coalition. They moved him to four more locations, one of which was hit by an airstrike. He ended up at al-Thawra pretrial detention center and was freed in early 2018, after his family paid one million riyals to Houthi mediators.

#### ***Sahar, Sanaa***

Sahar, who worked with two aid groups in Sanaa during the conflict, said the Houthis often interfered with humanitarian assistance, including adding names to beneficiary lists, asking for hundreds of baskets of goods for officers or the families of deceased fighters, and occasionally trying to change the entire program of work. In 2017, a National Security Bureau officer summoned her to a meeting.

She went because she did not want to make them angry. The officers took her to a largely destroyed building in Sanaas old city and took

her cell phone and questioned her more and more aggressively about her organizations activities.

They kept her there for three hours, telling her they wanted her to be an informant about aid agencies, threatening her and citing specific details about her family members. I was sick and shivering on the floor, she said.

The men finally made her sign a blank piece of paper: Of course I signed, I wanted to go home. She said the officers told her, Everything is permitted. We can take you from your house at any point. It takes only one car [to take you away]. She fled Sanaa.

### ***Yahiya al-Hayeg, Hodeida***

In late 2016, armed Houthis arrested Yahiya al-Hayeg, a high-school teacher, in Hodeida. He said he was handcuffed, blindfolded, and taken to the Officers Club, a damaged building once used for social events. He was held for about a month and a half in solitary confinement while he was interrogated.

He said the interrogator would order him to do painful exercises and beat him when he couldn't continue and shackle him and hang him by his arms for extended periods until my arms and body were extended to the roof, and my toes barely touched the ground. The interrogators accused him of working with the Saudi-led coalition and anti-Houthi forces.

At the third interrogation session, he said, I surrendered and told them he would sign any statement they wrote. But the mistreatment and threats to kill him and harm his family continued. One time, a guard put a gun to his head while another said, No, don't kill him. He will talk. He said that, Those 15 days were the worst days of my life.

A month later he was transferred to another Houthi informal detention center in the Hodeida citadel, but had to be carried there because of his injuries. A detained doctor came to examine him and said he needed medical treatment he was wounded, malnourished, and dehydrated. The guards refused to let him leave the prison but brought in some fluids to treat him.

Al-Hayeg was not mistreated in the citadel, but he provided names of others who were. He saw guards beat people with cables and pull fingernails off. He saw one of his students, who had disappeared during his last year of high school, among the detainees.

In mid-2017, the Houthis took all the prisoners about 140, according to two former detainees from the citadel, releasing a few dozen and transferring the remainder. Al-Hayeg was in the last group and was taken to the Central Prison. A few days after guards opened fire on detainees, he was transferred to Sanaa Central Prison, where he remained for about five months, then was released in a prisoner swap. His family had no word of his whereabouts until he reached Sanaa, when he was allowed to call them.

### **No Justice for Mistreatment**

The Houthi armed group, led by Abdul Malik Al-Houthi, has controlled the capital, Sanaa, and much of Yemens northwest since September 2014. Former president Saleh was allied with the Houthis, and forces loyal to him and members of his General Peoples Congress shared responsibility for governance in these territories.

Houthi-Saleh joint control over Sanaa and other areas was formalized on July 28, 2016, when the Houthis and the General Peoples Congress announced the formation of the Supreme Political Council [to run the country](#). The council oversaw the Sanaa-based Interior Ministry, which in turn oversaw formal detention facilities in Houthi-Saleh-controlled Yemen.

In December 2017, fighting broke out between Houthi and Saleh forces, with the Houthis killing Saleh on December 4. The Houthis quickly consolidated control over Sanaa and surrounding governorates.

In late 2017, the Supreme Political Council [appointed Maj. Gen. Abdulhakim Ahmed al-Mawri](#) interior minister. The Vice Minister of Interior, reportedly responsible for detention facilities, is Maj. Gen. Abdulhakem Hashim al-Khaiwani, also known as Abu al-Karar. Formal detention facilities under Interior Ministry control in the cases Human Rights Watch documented include, in Sanaa: The Central Prison, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and al-Thawra and Habra pretrial detention facilities, and, in Hodeida: the Central Prison.

Former detainees, their relatives, and their lawyers have identified a number of informal detention facilities where people are detained, disappeared, mistreated, and tortured, including sites where Human Rights Watch has documented abuse: in Sanaa, the National Security Bureau, the Political Security Office, and Zain al-Abideen mosque; and in Hodeida, the Political Security Office, the Officers Club, and the Citadel. Some of these have since been shut down. The exact number of facilities or people detained in them remains unknown.

Houthi prison directors and guards use *noms-de-guerre*, making identification difficult. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly documented abusive detention by the Political Security Office and National Security Bureau, Yemens primary intelligence agencies, both of which had poor human rights records prior to the current conflict. A former detainee and a Sanaa-based lawyer identified the head of the PSO prison in Sanaa as Abu Aqeel. In January, the Supreme Political Council appointed Abdul Qader al-Shami, who served as acting director of the agency since late 2015, as the director. A Sanaa-based lawyer and a former detainee said that detainees at the NSB are overseen by Abu Emad.

In 2017, the UN Security Council Panel of Experts identified 11 members of the two agencies who either committed or held command responsibility in the Houthi-Saleh forces for arbitrary arrest and deprivation of liberty, torture (including of a child), denial of timely medical assistance, prolonged enforced disappearances, lack of due process, and three deaths in custody. The panel named Abu Emad, identified as Motlaq Amer al-Marrani, as involved in all 16 violations investigated.

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*Students in the International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, including Zeineb Bouraoui, Danesha Grady, Tarek Zeidan, and Canem Ozyildirim, made valuable contributions to this research.*

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