

Yemen: Enforced Disappearance as a Tool to Silence the Press

On August 30, the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, rights and media organizations demand disclosure of the fate of [Waheed al-Sufi](#) and accountability for those responsible for the disappearance of journalists

On the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, ARTICLE 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and the Yemeni Media Freedoms Observatory (Marsadk) call on all parties to the conflict and the de facto authorities in Yemen to immediately end the use of enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention against journalists and media workers, and to urgently disclose the fate of journalist [Waheed al-Sufi](#), which has remained unknown since his disappearance in Sana'a in April 2015.

More than eleven years later, Waheed Al-Sufi's family continues to be denied one of their most basic rights: to know whether he is alive, where he is, and what happened to him. The continued uncertainty surrounding his fate is not simply a matter from the past. It constitutes an ongoing violation that compounds the suffering of the victim and his family, while sending a chilling message to journalists and media workers across Yemen that practicing their profession may carry unpredictable and grave consequences.

Enforced disappearance is not simply arbitrary detention or an unlawful deprivation of liberty. It occurs when a person is deprived of their liberty by State authorities or by persons or groups acting with the authorisation, support or acquiescence of the State, or by other actors exercising effective authority, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the person's fate or whereabouts, placing them outside the protection of the law.

The particular danger of enforced disappearance lies in the fact that it places victims beyond the reach of effective legal protection, deprives their families of the right to know the truth, and prevents access to lawyers, courts, and oversight mechanisms. It also creates conditions in which further violations can occur, including torture, ill-treatment, extortion and even death in custody – constituting a flagrant violation of international human rights law and relevant international treaties.

The impact of enforced disappearance extends far beyond the person who has disappeared. It affects families and entire communities, and in contexts of conflict and repression it can be used as a means of silencing independent voices, instilling fear and preventing people from asking questions or exercising their rights – as happened to other journalists in Yemen, including [Naseh Shaker](#), Tawfiq al-Mansouri, Younis Abdulsalam, Hala Badhawi, Mohammed al-Salahi, and many others.

According to data documented by the Observatory, journalists and media workers in Yemen have been subjected to 540 cases of arbitrary arrest and detention since 2015, of which 235 cases turned into enforced disappearances.

These figures point to a deeply concerning pattern. In many cases, a violation begins with an arrest, followed by the loss of contact with the victim, a denial that they are being detained, or the withholding of information about their whereabouts. In some cases, families receive conflicting or misleading information about where their relatives are being held, prolonging

uncertainty and making it more difficult to access the victim or take legal action to protect them. Denying that a person is being detained or providing misleading information about their whereabouts is not a secondary detail in such cases. It further isolates victims from legal protection and gives those responsible greater opportunity to commit further violations beyond public scrutiny and accountability.

Waheed al-Sufi: More Than Eleven Years of Enforced Absence

[Journalist](#) Waheed al-Sufi represents one of the longest cases of enforced disappearance involving a journalist in Yemen. On April 6, 2015, Al-Sufi disappeared in the capital, Sanaa, which is under the control of the Ansar Allah group (the Houthis). Since then, his fate and whereabouts have remained unknown, he has not been brought before any judicial authority, and no charges have been filed against him.

His disappearance took place amid a wider campaign targeting journalists and media workers during the same period, further raising serious concerns about the circumstances of his disappearance and the responsibility of the group for his detention and disappearance.

Since then, his family has continued to search for him and demand information about his fate, without receiving any official information that could put an end to their uncertainty. Family members have faced threats and harassment, forcing them to change their places of residence and phone numbers. A Facebook page that had been used to campaign for information about his fate was also shut down.

The organizations stress that the continued concealment of his fate renders the violation ongoing and continues to expose him to the risk of serious abuses, including torture or death in custody, in the absence of any investigation or accountability.

In this context, the organizations recall the case of journalist [Mohammed al-Muqri](#), who remained missing for more than nine years before it later emerged that he had been executed by gunmen from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula during their control of Hadramout governorate. His case demonstrates that prolonged enforced disappearance does not merely constitute a violation of liberty, it can pose a direct threat to life.

Documented cases show that enforced disappearance is often the gateway to a chain of further violations, including torture, ill-treatment, extortion, and denial of contact with family or legal counsel, in the absence of any judicial oversight.

Journalist [Naseh Shaker](#) was subjected to enforced disappearance for nearly a year after being detained at Aden Airport. It subsequently emerged that he had been subjected to detention, torture, and cruel and degrading treatment. The repercussions of his case continue to this day, despite an order of his release. Journalist [Hala Badhawi](#) was also subjected to enforced disappearance in Hadramout governorate, then detained for more than 100 days. She was subjected to a defamation campaign that affected her professional and personal life, ultimately driving her away from journalism.

In other cases, including that of journalist [Waleed Ali Ghaleb](#) and six other journalists in Hodeidah, misleading information about their places of detention was used to prolong the

state of uncertainty for six months, before it emerged that they were being held in a security and intelligence prison, with visits later permitted.

The organizations hold that denying detention or providing misleading information about the whereabouts of victims constitutes part of the violation itself. Such practices give those responsible additional time to commit further abuses away from oversight, and deprive families of any legal means to protect their relatives.

The impact of enforced disappearance does not stop with the victim. It extends to families and the entire journalistic community. Families are left living with permanent anxiety and uncertainty over the fate of their loved ones, caught between life and death. In this way, enforced disappearance becomes a tool of intimidation that extends far beyond the immediate victim. It drives journalists toward self-censorship, discourages them from reporting on sensitive issues, and may push some to leave the profession or the country, undermining the media's ability to fulfil its role in informing the public and holding those in power to account.

The organizations affirm that these practices violate fundamental rights, including the right to liberty and personal security, the right to know the truth, the right to a fair trial, and protection from torture. Detention without judicial warrants, or denial of the place of detention, constitutes a flagrant violation of Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in addition to violating Yemeni law. International law absolutely prohibits enforced disappearance, and it cannot be justified under any circumstances, including armed conflict or security considerations.

The organizations hold that the continuation of these violations is directly linked to impunity. The absence of investigations and accountability encourages the repetition of such crimes and reinforces an environment in which perpetrators can act without fear of consequences. Protecting journalists therefore cannot be achieved through partial release alone. It requires establishing the truth, holding those responsible to account, preventing recurrence, and ensuring effective remedies and reparation for victims and their families.

The undersigned organizations call on all parties to the conflict and authorities in Yemen to:

- Immediately disclose the fate and whereabouts of journalist Waheed al-Sufi, and secure his immediate release if he is being held, or provide clarification of his fate in accordance with the law and guaranteeing his family's right to know the truth.
- Release of all arbitrarily detained journalists or bring them before independent and impartial courts in proceedings that meet international fair-trial standards.
- Immediately end all forms of enforced disappearance and secret detention of journalists, and refrain from using such practices to punish or silence them.

- Allow independent international bodies and organizations to visit prisons and places of detention.
- Conduct independent investigations and hold all officials responsible for these violations accountable, regardless of their position or affiliation.
- Close unofficial places of detention and ensure judicial oversight of all places of detention.
- Protect the families of the disappeared and guarantee their right to know the truth, while ending harassment faced by human rights defenders, relatives of victims, witnesses, and lawyers working on these cases.
- Bring national legislation into line with international standards and criminalize enforced disappearance.

Signatory Organizations:

ARTICLE 19

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Yemeni Media Freedoms Observatory (Marsadk)