

How the United Nations Lost Its Influence in Yemen



On October 9, Abdullah Shamsan Al-Akhaly, an IT worker with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), passed away unexpectedly in Sana'a from a heart attack. In the days leading up to his death, the young Yemeni had expressed to family members his fear of being detained by the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) at any moment due to his work with a UN-affiliated agency.

That persistent anxiety took a heavy toll on him, as he watched colleagues being arbitrarily arrested by the Houthis, often without knowing the charges.

“I thought my friend was just anxious,” said “M.H.,” a friend of Abdullah’s, in an interview with Noon Post. “I never imagined that fear would be the cause of his death.”

Since seizing control of the Yemeni capital, the Houthis have significantly restricted the operations of UN personnel and other international aid and development organizations.

No activities can be carried out in Houthi-controlled areas without prior approval from the “Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs” (SCMCHA), a body the group created to monitor and limit aid operations, dictate the list of beneficiaries, and enforce the use of Houthi-

aligned local partners. But their tightening grip has not stopped there.

According to human rights advocates, these restrictions have intensified over the past five years. A human rights report states that the Houthis have seized an estimated \$9 billion in aid distributed by the UN and international relief agencies in areas under their control.

Recently, a spike in arrests and violations targeting local UN employees has been reported in Sana'a and other regions. According to UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric, 53 staff members are currently detained by the Houthis, with some held since 2021.

These repeated detentions raise numerous questions about the Houthis' motivations:

Why are they targeting UN staff? What impact does this have on aid efforts in their territory? Are these actions solely rooted in Yemen's internal conflict, or do they reflect broader political and security agendas? Another question also looms: are these arrests linked to recent Israeli airstrikes on Houthi positions?

Humanitarian Staff or Spies?

In June 2024, the Houthis defended their arrest of several UN staffers in Sana'a by accusing the UN of violating its operational agreements in Yemen. Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a senior political figure in the movement, declared: "We condemn the US for planting its spies under the guise of humanitarian and diplomatic work," claiming his group had "evidence and documents" proving espionage activities by UN employees.

He said this evidence would only be shared with a third party that respects national sovereignty and demanded an explanation from the UN for what he called "unjustified behavior."

Then in late August, the Houthis arrested dozens of UN workers on suspicions of involvement in the alleged Israeli assassination of Ahmed Al-Rahwi, Prime Minister of the Houthi government in Sana'a, and several cabinet members. In response, the UN announced on September 26 that it was drastically scaling down operations in Houthi areas, except for life-saving assistance.

On October 16, the Houthis announced the death of their Chief of Staff, Abdulkarim Al-Ghamari, in an Israeli airstrike. Following the announcement, Houthi leader Abdulmalik Al-Houthi delivered a televised speech accusing the United States and Israel of using "spy cells embedded within WFP and UNICEF" to carry out criminal operations.

He claimed these cells were highly trained, equipped with sensitive surveillance technology, and provided intelligence that contributed to the targeted killings of

his government's leaders.

Al-Houthi went on to allege that the detained UN employees had used advanced surveillance devices typically employed by global intelligence agencies and warned that “no one will protect humanitarian workers from accountability.”

Political analyst Abdulmajid Al-Salahi argues that these arrests are not isolated incidents or purely security-related. Rather, he sees them as part of a broader Houthi strategy to assert absolute control over all activity within their territory including humanitarian and diplomatic operations.

“The Houthis are sending a clear message: they are the sole authority that must be obeyed,” Al-Salahi told Noon Post. “They also want to silence international witnesses to their abuses.”

UN spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric noted on the organization's website that Houthi-controlled areas have recorded 28 cases of polio, emphasizing the growing urgency of protecting children and implicitly calling for the resumption of UN activities in those areas.

Dr. Fares Al-Beel, head of the Future Yemen Center for Strategic Studies, told Noon Post that the Houthis are not genuinely concerned with the well-being of Yemenis or with maintaining humanitarian operations, despite the immense impact such aid has had. Instead, the group seeks to control the distribution of aid for its military and economic gain.

Al-Beel argues that once the Houthis no longer found value in the aid, they resorted to detaining aid workers as a means of blackmailing the UN and international community into accepting their terms, particularly as global criticism of their violations intensifies.

A Bargaining Chip

Last month, UN Secretary-General António Guterres met with Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council President Rashad Al-Alimi and announced new measures to protect humanitarian staff in Yemen, including relocating UN offices to the southern city of Aden.

However, Yemeni officials remain skeptical, arguing that the UN's responses to Houthi violations are often short-lived and reactionary. They cite the UN's March 2025 reversal of a previous decision to suspend operations in Houthi territory after just one week of suspension.

Deputy Minister of Human Rights Nabil Abdulhafeez told Noon Post that the Yemeni government has been urging the UN to move its headquarters to Aden for eight years, but the organization has repeatedly declined, citing the fact that its primary office has been in Sana'a since before the war began.

Researcher Fares Al-Beel echoed this sentiment, saying the UN’s weak stance toward Houthi abuses is partly due to its deference to major world powers, which, in his words, have been “indulgent” with the group encouraging further defiance of international resolutions and norms.

According to observers, the UN has opted for a cautious, balanced approach to dealing with the Houthis, fearing that any escalation could lead to the expulsion of its staff or a complete halt of its programs in northern Yemen potentially affecting millions in need.

Bureaucratic inertia within the UN further slows its decision-making, says political analyst Abdulmajid Al-Salahi. He also points to an uncomfortable truth: the majority of detainees are Yemeni nationals, and thus do not receive the same level of international urgency or advocacy that foreign staff would.

In conclusion, Al-Salahi believes the Houthis are likely to use the detention of UN employees as a bargaining chip in upcoming negotiations whether with the UN envoy or regional powers.

He anticipates a gradual or conditional release of some detainees in exchange for humanitarian or political concessions. But he sees no lasting resolution in the near term, as the Houthis understand that these arrests give them valuable leverage in any future dialogue.