



Briefing:

## **Masafer Yatta: Urgent action needed to Defend the Defenders**

One year ago, UN Special Rapporteurs have sounded the alarm about the “aggravating trend of Israel’s criminalisation and harassment of human rights defenders, aimed at silencing them and rooting out human rights work in the [Masafer Yatta] region”. They have denounced the repression as “a direct assault on the core of human rights and international humanitarian law, and a serious violation of the right of human rights defenders to engage in their work. This also confirms that impunity over abuse of power fosters power to abuse.”<sup>1</sup>

**Over the recent weeks, Israeli occupation forces, including their military courts, have ramped up their repression of human rights defenders (HRD) in Masafer Yatta. They are particularly targeting activists that are part of Youth of Sumoud,** a youth organization that for over five years has consistently worked to denounce Israeli violations of Palestinian rights and to protect the communities in the area.

On 4 May, 2022, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in favor of the forcible expulsion of around 1,200 Palestinians living in hamlets in the so-called Firing Zone 918. By systematically repressing activists of Youth of Sumoud and other human rights defenders in Masafer Yatta, the Israeli occupation seeks to facilitate and escalate the decades-long forcible displacement of the threatened communities, which is hampered by the work of these human rights defenders.

The latest case of repression regards, **19-year-old human rights defender Mohammed Huraini.** On 10 August 2023, Israeli soldiers brutally assaulted and arrested Mohammed at the entrance of his village of Al-Twani, Masafer Yatta. After hours of interrogation, the Israeli police released Mohammed on a bail of 1000 ILS (266 USD) on 11 August 2023. No charges have been pressed against him. Before that, on 5 August, 2023, the Israeli occupation forces arrested Mohammed

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<sup>1</sup> Press releases Special Procedures , “Israel: Criminalisation and harassment of human rights defenders in Masafer Yatta must end, say UN experts” 02 August 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/israel-criminalisation-and-harassment-human-rights-defenders-masafer-yatta>

while he was grazing the sheep in his family's land. The arrest and harassment of Mohammed twice within less than a week are part of the intensified Israeli persecution of Palestinian HRDs across Historic Palestine, and in Masafer Yatta in particular.

**We call on:**

**Partners and supporters of Palestinian rights to:**

- **Raise awareness about the escalating repression through their own (social) media and by ensuring coverage in other (social) media.**
- **Address their governments to take concrete and immediate action as specified below.**

**States to:**

- **Condemn publicly and through appropriate diplomatic channels Israel's systematic targeting of Mohammed Huraini and other human rights defenders in Masafer Yatta as part of Israeli illegal policies of displacement, settlement, annexation and apartheid.**
- **Visit the human rights defenders who engage in the activist work of YoS in Masafer Yatta to emphasize support and solidarity with them.**
- **Invite Mohammed and other members of YoS to discuss with them the challenges they face and how to protect them from Israeli violations and harassment.**
- **Put pressure on Israel, including through legal and targeted sanctions, in order to end their repression of HRDs as well as its regime of apartheid, military occupation and colonialism.**

**Third states have to ensure protection to Mohammed and all HRDs as required by international conventions, particularly the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society.**

**The United Nations to:**

- **Activate all available Special Procedures and Human Rights Mechanisms to protect Palestinian human rights defenders and hold those responsible for their repression accountable.**
- **Activate the UN Special Committee against Apartheid and to impose legal and targeted sanctions on Israel's regime in order to end Israel's violations of international law and human rights.**
- **Ensure that Third States do not recognize, aid or assist Israel in its violations of international law and human rights.**

**Profiles of some of the targeted activists in Youth of Sumoud:**

## ***Youth of Sumoud***

Established in 2017 by young activists from Masafer Yatta, Youth of Sumoud (YoS) organizes and participates in peaceful protests and demonstrations against Israeli land seizure, systemic settler and army violence, home and school demolitions and illegal Israeli settlement expansion in Masafer Yatta.

The group is also involved in documenting the Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights and international law in the area, as well as in raising international awareness about such violations. In 2020, YoS extended its non-violent methods of resistance to other parts of Area 'C' of the occupied West Bank under full Israeli control by creating an initiative called Faz'aa. The initiative aims to support the steadfastness of Palestinian farmers who are subject to systematic Israeli settler violence, especially during the olive harvest season in October each year.

The peaceful activist work YoS engage with resonates with the definition of human rights defenders according to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders: "Individuals, groups and associations ... contributing to ... the effective elimination of all violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of peoples and individuals."

The recently intensified Israeli arrest, intimidation and harassment perpetrated against activists of YoS are part of years-old Israeli attempts to silence the group, as well as punish them for their crucial role in peacefully defending their communities, and exposing crimes and violations perpetrated against them.

## ***Mohammed Huraini***

Mohammed Huraini was born in the village of Al-Twani in 2004. He grew up within a family that has a long history in peaceful resistance to Israeli illegal settlement expansion and the construction of the Apartheid Wall. Currently, Mohammed is doing his undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature at Birzeit University near Ramallah. For years, Mohammed has been involved in the non-violent activist work carried out by Youth of Sumud.

Below we list the violence and harassment perpetrated against Mohamed over the last few years:

- 10 August 2023: a group of Israeli soldiers in a civil car arrested Mohammed at the entrance of Al-Twani village. Mohammed was handcuffed and blindfolded before the soldiers started hitting him on the head. Mohammed was released on a bail of 1000 ILS (266 USD) on 11 August, 2023. No charges have been pressed against him.
- 5 August 2023: A group of Israeli illegal settlers from the nearby settlement of Havat Ma'oun invaded Mohammed's family land in Al-Twani while he was grazing the sheep. The Israeli army escorting the settlers arrested Mohammed in response to his attempt to

prevent the illegal settlers from invading his land. The Israeli army released Mohammed only after hours of harassment in an Israeli military base, during which he was kept handcuffed and blindfolded. Hours after his release on 6 August 2023, Mohammed was called for interrogation in the police station in the illegal settlement of Kiryat Arba' before he was released again. During his detention Mohammed received threats from the Israeli officer who interrogated him in the police station to stop his efforts as a human rights defender. According to Mohammed, the officer told him "You are a trouble-maker. I will release you this time, but I assure you that if you make any problems next time, you will pay a high price."

- September 2022: Mohammed and his father Hafez Huraini, a prominent non-violent activist and community leader in Masafer Yatta, were attacked by a group of illegal Israeli settlers, one of them was holding an M16 rifle. Mohammed survived a murder attempt by the settlers, who were shooting at him while he was trying to rescue his father from them. The Israeli military arrested Hafez after the settlers broke both his arms. When Mohammed went to the Israeli police station in Kiryat Arba' to give his testimony about the attack as an eyewitness, he was held as a detainee in the police station.
- 2 December 2021: Illegal Israeli settlers from the settlement of Havat Ma'oun - built on land belonging to the residents of Al-Twani village - invaded the land of Mohammed's family and started damaging the crops there. Mohammed called the Israeli police to stop the settlers. Instead, the police came and arrested Mohammed, who was a minor back then while the settlers were never held accountable.
- Between September and December 2021: The Israeli occupation forces arrested Mohammed, several times while he was accompanying school children on their way from Khirbet Tuba to the school of Al-Twani. Accompanying school children from Khirbet Tuba who are constantly subjected to Israeli illegal settlers' violence is part of the non-violent protective presence YoS provides to the communities in Masafer Yatta.

### ***Sami Huraini***

Sami Huraini is Mohammed's elder brother and a co-founder of YoS and has also been subjected to similar Israeli attempts to criminalize his non-violent work of resistance. On 2 August 2022, UN experts issued a statement condemning Israel's harassment of human rights defenders and humanitarian workers in Masafer Yatta. The experts particularly expressed concerns about Israeli persecution and criminalization of Sami. In the statement, they highlighted the ongoing trial of Sami in Israeli military courts for allegedly obstructing and assaulting a soldier and entering a closed military zone, following his participation in a peaceful protest on 8 January 2021.

For more see: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/sami-huraini>

### ***Ali Awad***

Ali Awad is another prominent human rights defender and member of YoS from the Masafer Yatta village of Khirbet Tuba. He has also been encountering similar Israeli practices of arrest, detention and harassment.

For instance, on 22 June, 2023, an Israeli soldier escorting illegal settlers in Khirbet Tuba was filmed while he was hitting Ali in the chest with his gun. The soldier also appears in the video stating that his job in the area is to secure settlers rather than prevent them from assaulting Palestinians. In 2019, the Israeli occupation forces arrested Ali and his friend for trying to rescue a shepherd, who fainted after the Israeli military brutally assaulted him while he was in his land.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> An AJ+ video about recent Israeli settler violence against human rights defenders and residents in Khirbet Tuba:

<https://twitter.com/ajplus/status/1688974353898336257?t=VjOc5M7xZll6sDJg85SG6w&s=35>