

# URGENT ACTION

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ARBITRARILY DETAINED

In early May 2024 Tunisian authorities arbitrarily arrested Sherifa Riahi, while on maternity leave nursing her newborn baby, Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo – former and current staff of Terre d'Asile Tunisie, an NGO assisting refugees and migrants. Days later, they arrested Imen Ouardani, a former local official who had collaborated with the NGO. Authorities targeted them as part of a broader crackdown on civil society supporting refugees and migrants, fuelled by racist and xenophobic rhetoric, and have since held them in arbitrary pretrial detention. They must immediately release them and drop all charges against them.

**TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER**

*President of the Republic Kais Saïed*  
Route de la Goulette  
Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie  
Email: [contact@carthage.tn](mailto:contact@carthage.tn)  
X: @TnPresidency – [Facebook](#)

Your Excellency,

*I write to you to express my grave concern over the prolonged arbitrary detention of human rights defenders Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo, from Terre d'Asile Tunisie, the Tunisian branch of French NGO France Terre d'Asile, and Imen Ouardani – former deputy mayor of the eastern city of Sousse, since May 2024. The NGO is registered and operated transparently, providing essential assistance to vulnerable refugees and migrants in cooperation with local and national authorities, including the Sousse municipality. While they should have never been arrested, we call on judicial authorities to promptly put an end to their pretrial detention, which has not been demonstrated to be necessary and is currently not subject to judicial review, until all the charges are dropped.*

*Authorities investigated them together with three other Terre d'Asile staff for their work and 16 former municipality officials and employees for their collaboration with the NGO, specifically the opening of a Terre d'Asile facility in a municipal building. The investigation, premised on the idea of a foreign-backed civil society conspiracy to “permanently settle” Sub-Saharan African migrants in Tunisia, violates their rights to freedom of association and expression, criminalizes legitimate collaboration between civil society and local authorities and violates Tunisia’s international obligations towards refugees and migrants by hampering protection and assistance work. Helping migrants irrespective of their legal status is protected by international law and is not to be equated with human smuggling or trafficking, in line with the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime ratified by Tunisia.*

*Authorities have also hindered Sherifa Riahi’s children’s visits. International law and standards outline that pretrial detention must only be used when strictly necessary to prevent suspects from absconding, interfering with the investigation or committing a serious crime, notably for women with children.*

***I urge you to ensure that authorities immediately release Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi, Mohamed Joo and Imen Ouardani and drop all charges against them. Pending this, authorities must promptly reply to the former’s requests to meet with her children and to respect their best interest. I also call on your government to cease targeting human rights defenders solely for the exercise of their right to defend rights.***

Yours sincerely,

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

From 3 May 2024 onwards, the Tunisian authorities launched an unprecedented [crackdown](#) on NGOs working with refugees and migrants, raiding at least three [organizations](#) and arresting or investigating the staff of at least 15 organizations. This took place in parallel to [a wider crackdown](#) on refugee and migrant rights, after a year of racist and xenophobic official statements, often from President Kais Saied, [claiming](#) the presence of Black Africans in Tunisia was part of a conspiracy: “Whoever is behind this phenomenon is human trafficking and at the same time claims to be defending human rights.” A few days after the first arrests, on 6 May, the president described staff in migration organizations as “traitors” and “[foreign] agents” seeking the “settlement” of migrants. On 7 May, a Tunis prosecutor [announced](#) an investigation against NGOs for “providing financial support to illegal migrants”.

Terre d’Asile Tunisie, the Tunisian branch of French refugee and migrant rights organization France Terre d’Asile, was among the first NGOs targeted. On 4 and 5 May 2024, police searched their offices and summoned its employees. On 7, 8 and 13 May respectively, police arrested and detained Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo, respectively former director, director and financial and administrative director of the NGO. Police also arrested two former officials of the municipality of Sousse, including former deputy mayor and civil society activist Imen Ouardani on 11 May. On 16 May, a Tunis investigative judge placed them in pretrial detention pending investigation for “assisting illegal migrants” (Articles 38 to 43 of Law 40 of 1975 concerning Passports and Travel Documents), abusing a position as public official “to obtain an unjustified advantage or to cause harm to the administration” (Article 96 of the Penal Code), money laundering, fraud and attacking a person or property. Those investigated are the NGO’s legal representative, six Terre d’Asile former and current employees and 17 former municipality officials and employees. The judge ordered a freeze on the organization’s and the individuals’ personal bank accounts pending investigation and a financial expert to investigate “unjustified and unknown revenue”, which concluded on 8 January 2025 that there were no irregularities. Since May 2024, authorities rejected at least three requests for conditional release.

On 28 January 2025, the judge concluded his investigation and referred the case to trial solely for six people – Sherifa Riahi, Yadh Bousselmi, Mohamed Joo, a fourth Terre d’Asile employee, Imen Ouardani and another former local official, after dropping several criminal charges including money laundering and abusing a public official’s position. Following the prosecution’s appeal, on 26 February 2025, an indictment chamber ruled to prosecute the six Terre d’Asile employees and 17 municipality officials and employees for “forming an alliance” to “shelter individuals entering or leaving the Tunisian territory illegally” (Articles 39 and 41 of Law 40 of 1975), “knowingly directly or indirectly helping or attempting to facilitate the entry, exit, movement or irregular stay of a foreigner in Tunisia” (Article 25 of Law 68-7 of 1968 relating to the Condition of Foreigners), and abusing a public official’s position. The charges are solely based on the work of Terre d’Asile and their partnership with the Sousse municipality to support refugees and migrants. The authorities claimed that baseless administrative procedural irregularities in the signature of the partnership demonstrated the illegal exploitation of a public building in implementation of “a [foreign] plan to enable irregular migrants to move around, reside and settle in Tunisia.” The chamber also ruled to prosecute Mohamed Joo for “fabricating, under the name of a civil servant, a certificate of good conduct or any other document likely to procure employment, credit or assistance” (Article 199 of the Penal Code) without basis. Defendants appealed the indictment.

The detention of Sherifa Riahi and the authorities hindering her children’s visits raise additional concerns regarding discrimination based on gender and parental status, as well as the respect of the best interest of the children. She is permitted weekly visits, conducted via a glass wall and an intercom, thus not allowing her to hold her baby and her four-year-old son. Since June 2024, prison authorities have only allowed her three visits in a room allowing for direct physical contact, with delays of up to three months to obtain authorization. According to the Bangkok Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners, prison visits with children should allow for open contact and women prisoners should be given the maximum possible opportunity and facilities to meet with their children.

**PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET:** Arabic, French and English.

You can also write in your own language.

**PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL:** 10 November 2025.

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

**NAME AND PRONOUN:** Sherifa Riahi (she/her), Yadh Bousselmi (he/him), Mohamed Joo (he/him) and Imen Ouardani (she/her).

## ADDITIONAL TARGETS

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