

# 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, as well as 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, fueled 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 a letter to the government official(s) listed. Use the sample letter below as a guide or use your own words.
- [Click here](#) to report your action(s) on **UA 54.25**. We share this number with the officials we are trying to persuade.

### President of the Republic Kais Saied

Route de la Goulette  
Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie  
Email: [contact@carthage.tn](mailto:contact@carthage.tn)  
Twitter/X: @TnPresidency  
Facebook: Presidence.tn

*Send a copy of your letter to the address below*

**CC: Tunisian Embassy in the United States**  
**Ambassador Hanene Al-Tajouri Bessassi**  
1515 Massachusetts Avenue, NW,  
Washington DC 20005  
Email: [AT.Washington@Tunisianembassy.org](mailto:AT.Washington@Tunisianembassy.org)

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, and **Imen Ouardani** – former deputy mayor of Sousse, since May 2024. The NGO is registered and operates transparently, providing essential assistance to vulnerable refugees and migrants in cooperation with local and national authorities, including the Sousse municipality.

Authorities investigated them together with three other Terre d’Asile staff for their work as well as 16 former municipality officials and employees for their collaboration with the NGO. 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.

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.

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. 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 May 3, 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 May 6, the president described staff in migration organizations as “traitors” and “[foreign] agents” seeking the “settlement” of migrants. On May 7, 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 May 7, 8, and 13 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 May 11. On May 16, a Tunis investigative judge placed them in pretrial detention pending investigation. Those investigated are the NGO’s legal representative, six Terre d’Asile former and current employees as well as 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 January 8, 2025, that there were no irregularities. Since May 2024, authorities rejected at least three requests for conditional release.

On January 28, 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.

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, English, or your own language.

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

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