

# URGENT ACTION

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS UNJUSTLY HELD

In early May 2024 Tunisian authorities arrested refugee rights defenders Mustapha Djemali and Abderrazek Krimi, from the Tunisian Council for Refugees (CTR), a reputable local organization working in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency, and ordered their pre-trial detention as part of a broader crackdown on organizations supporting refugees and migrants. They questioned them solely in relation to their legitimate work defending the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Tunisian authorities must immediately release them, drop all charges against them and ensure that human rights defenders are able to work in a safe and enabling environment without reprisal.

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

*President of the Republic Kais Saïed*  
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Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie  
Email: [contact@carthage.tn](mailto:contact@carthage.tn)  
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Your Excellency,

*I write to you to express my grave concern over the prolonged detention of human rights defenders Mustapha Djemali and Abderrazek Krimi. On 7 May 2024, a Tunis investigative judge placed them in pre-trial detention pending investigation for “assisting the clandestine entry” of foreign nationals and “providing [them] shelter” and has since renewed their pre-trial detention orders twice.*

*The charges are solely based on their legitimate work at the Tunisian Council of Refugees (Conseil Tunisien pour les Réfugiés – CTR), a Tunisian NGO that worked with the Tunisian authorities and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to pre-register asylum seekers and provide essential assistance. Their detention is arbitrary as defending refugee and migrant rights, irrespective of their legal status, including by providing shelter, is not a legitimate offense under international law and should never be equated with human smuggling or trafficking, in line with the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and its Trafficking and Smuggling Protocols ratified by Tunisia. The authorities are abusing these provisions to criminalize human rights and humanitarian work, constituting undue interferences with the rights of human rights defenders, as set out by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and with the right to freedom of association under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ratified by Tunisia.*

*Tunisia is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention which gives refugees the right to identity and travel documents; work, housing, education and relief; and protection from sanction for irregular entry. Following their arrest, the CTR suspended its activities, triggering critical disruptions in access to asylum procedures and basic services including health assistance, shelter and child protection.*

*Authorities have failed to provide them with medications without which they risk health complications.*

***I urge you to ensure that authorities drop all charges against Mustapha Djemali and Abderrazek Krimi and immediately release them. Pending this, I urge you to ensure that authorities provide them with access to the medication they require urgently. I also call on your government to cease targeted arrests of human rights defenders and allow them to operate in a safe and enabling environment without reprisals.***

*Yours sincerely,*

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In early May 2024, the Tunisian government launched a [clampdown](#) against refugees and migrants and civil society organizations defending their rights. On 6 May, in [public remarks](#), President Kais Saied attacked organizations working on migration, accusing them of seeking the "settlement" of migrants and describing them as "traitors" and "[foreign] agents". He stated: "There are networks inside who are connected to networks abroad... Financial transfers are received by... those who falsely claim that they are protecting [migrants], an association, you all know how they posted a tender to shelter these Africans... who are residing [in Tunisia] illegally."

On 7 May, a Tunis prosecutor [announced](#) the opening of an investigation against associations for "abusing their mandate to provide financial support" to irregular migrants. Authorities have since summoned, arrested and investigated the heads, former staff or members of at least 15 organizations. 10 human rights defenders, NGO staff and former local municipality staff who worked with them are in arbitrary pre-trial detention for accusations of supporting irregular migrants or of financial crimes relating to legitimate NGO funding. That same month, the authorities conducted forced evictions of refugees and migrants and convicted landlords for renting apartments to irregular migrants. This crackdown represented one of the latest escalations within [a wider deterioration](#) of refugee and migrant rights since [February 2023](#), marked by racially discriminatory practices and language. This pattern of criminalization of refugee and migrant rights defenders has also been documented in [Europe](#) and [beyond](#).

The Tunisian Council for Refugees (CTR), a Tunisian NGO founded in 2016, which worked with the UNHCR and Tunisian authorities to pre-register asylum seekers and provide essential assistance to vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, was among the first organizations targeted. Its founder Mustapha Djemali is a former high-level UNHCR official. On 2 May 2024, in line with local compliance requirements and as part of their regular activities, the CTR published a tender for hotels to shelter asylum seekers and refugees in precarious situations, following a request for assistance from the UNHCR and the region of Sfax. Following its publication, Tunisian media outlets and social media accounts shared screenshots of the tender claiming that civil society was conspiring for the "settlement" of "Africans" or "illegal migrants" in Tunisia, often using xenophobic and racist language. On 3 May, the police raided the CTR office in Tunis, arrested its director Mustapha Djemali and placed him in custody. On 4 May, the police arrested and placed Abderrazek Krimi, project manager at the CTR, in custody. Police officials interrogated the two HRDs about the CTR's funding, the activities of the organization with regards to irregular migrants, and the call for tenders.

On 7 May, an investigating judge at the Tunis Court of First Instance ordered their pre-trial detention for six months pending investigation for "forming an alliance or an organization" in order to "plan, facilitate, assist, mediate, or organize by any means, even without profit, the clandestine entry of a person into Tunisian territory" and "providing them with shelter" based on Articles 38, 39 and 41 of Law 40 of 1975 relating to Passports and Travel Documents. These charges lacking legal clarity fail to include elements of financial or material gain or exploitation which characterize human smuggling and trafficking and do not exempt human rights and humanitarian support, as required by the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and its Trafficking and Smuggling Protocols.

The judge renewed their detention for four months in October 2024 and in February 2025. Under Tunisian law, it cannot be renewed a third time. The judge has rejected at least four of their lawyer's requests for conditional release. He froze both their bank accounts and the account of the CTR pending investigation. On 18 March 2025, an expert report mandated by the judge to investigate their personal bank accounts and the account of the CTR was submitted to the court; it did not identify any irregularities. On 25 March, the judge stated during an investigation hearing session "You brought Black people into Tunisia illegally and you feed and shelter them, Tunisian history and laws will make you pay for it," raising concerns as to his impartiality and the defendants' right to a fair trial.

Mustapha Djemali, 80, suffers from Horton's disease which requires medication without which he risks health complications. Since September 2024, prison authorities have failed to provide him with his medication despite multiple requests and have not allowed his family to bring him the medication. They have also failed to allow his family to repair his broken reading glasses. Since the start of his detention, prison authorities have failed to provide Abderrazek Krimi with a medical prescription he requires.

**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:** Mustapha Djemali and Abderrazek Krimi (both he/him).