

Advocacy dossier

Murtadha Al-Janoubi

مرتضى الجنوبي

At liberty **Iraq**

Environmental activist documenting the degradation of Maysan's marshes, arrested after participating in protests demanding fair water allocations for communities facing drought and displacement, and released the same evening.

01

The case at a glance

Environmental activist documenting the degradation of Maysan's marshes, arrested after participating in protests demanding fair water allocations for communities facing drought and displacement, and released the same evening.

Status	Arrested	Country
At liberty	**4 Mar 2026**	**Iraq**

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Drop any charges that remain on record against Murtadha Al-Janoubi in connection with peaceful human rights work.

02 Confirm publicly that Murtadha Al-Janoubi faces no residual travel, financial, or professional restriction arising from this case.

03 Guarantee that Murtadha Al-Janoubi can resume that work without surveillance, summons, or further reprisal.

04 Provide effective remedy for the period of deprivation of liberty already served.

02

Documented violations

Each violation and the international standard it breaks.

Arbitrary detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9

Criminalisation of solidarity International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 21, 22 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 5

Threats and intimidation UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 12

03

How the case unfolded

27 January 2025

Context

Iraq's fourth Universal Periodic Review

Iraq underwent its fourth UPR at the UN, receiving recommendations to reduce arbitrary detention and protect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

1 March 2026

Defender activity

Criticises the draining of the marshes on social media

He published a post on Facebook criticising the draining of the marshes and the officials he held responsible, three days before his arrest. He uses his social media accounts to advocate for marsh communities and for the protection of the marshes as a World Heritage Site.

4 March 2026

Arrest

Arrested at a water-rights protest in Maysan

He was arrested in the morning in Al-Musharrah, Al-Kahla district, during demonstrations he had helped organise for fair water allocations for the marshes. Nine other protesters were also detained.

4 March 2026

Release

Released the same evening

He was released the same evening, as were the other protesters. No charges were reported.

04

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Murtadha Al-Janoubi was arrested during a water-rights protest in Al-Musharrah, Maysan, on 4 March 2026 and released the same evening. He has continued his public work on the marshes; a coalition of Iraqi and international civil society groups said on 29 April 2026 that the Governor of Maysan had begun legal proceedings against him, and no outcome of that case has been reported.

Background and Work

Murtadha Al-Janoubi built his reputation as an environmental activist through sustained field documentation of the marshes in Maysan Governorate, one of Iraq's most ecologically significant and economically vulnerable regions. For years he monitored the water crisis affecting the marshlands, recording its cascading effects on food security, livelihoods, and local ecosystems.

His public work examined domestic water management policies, the environmental consequences of oil expansion near the marshes, and the impact of reduced cross-border water flows. He documented conditions on the ground, dried riverbeds, depleted fish stocks, abandoned villages, and raised questions about the policy decisions behind them. His monitoring was rooted in direct observation and engagement with affected communities.

The marshes of Maysan are home to communities whose livelihoods depend on water for fishing, agriculture, and livestock. As drought intensified in recent years, displacement from the hardest-hit areas increased. Families who had lived in the region for generations were forced to leave. Others remained but faced severe shortages, relying on expensive water delivered by tanker trucks. Al-Janoubi documented these realities and linked them to public resource management, making his work both environmental advocacy and civil oversight of government policy.

The Arrest

In early 2026, drought conditions in Maysan reached a critical threshold. Drinking water supplies, agriculture, and livestock were under direct pressure. Communities around the Meshrab River and surrounding marshlands staged demonstrations demanding fair and sufficient water allocations and government action to address the crisis.

Al-Janoubi participated in these protests. On the morning of 4 March 2026 he was arrested in Al-Musharrah, Al-Kahla district, during demonstrations he had helped organise, together with nine other peaceful protesters. Iraqi authorities have not issued an official statement specifying the legal basis for his detention or the charges against him and the other detainees.

He was released the same evening. It remains unclear whether he was granted access to legal counsel or allowed to communicate with his family while held. The absence of this information raises serious concerns about respect for procedural safeguards under Iraqi law and international human rights standards.

Context of Intimidation in Maysan

This arrest cannot be separated from a broader pattern of targeting activists in Maysan. In recent years the governorate has witnessed assassinations, attempted assassinations, and attacks against those engaged in civil oversight and advocacy. These incidents have not been followed by transparent, independent investigations that lead to prosecutions or accountability for perpetrators or those who ordered the violence.

This impunity functions as an enabling factor. It expands the scope for violations and undermines the ability of civil society to monitor public policies and demand accountability. The arrest of Al-Janoubi and other protesters fits within this context. His documentation publicly linked marsh degradation to resource management decisions, including oil activities near ecologically sensitive areas, cross-border water management, and internal water distribution mechanisms. This work made him a predictable target in efforts to silence oversight where environmental crises intersect with economic and political interests.

Legal Framework and Obligations

Iraq is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Articles 19 and 21 of the Covenant guarantee the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Articles 36 and 38 of the Iraqi Constitution provide parallel protections. The right to water is recognised as a fundamental human right under international law, affirmed by UN General Comment No. 15 (2002) and UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292 (2010).

The 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders protects the right to monitor, document, and seek remedies for violations. It prohibits retaliation against individuals who exercise these rights. Procedural safeguards require that detainees be informed of the reasons for their detention, be able to defend themselves, have access to a lawyer and communication with family, and be brought without undue delay before a competent judicial authority.

On 27 January 2025, Iraq underwent its fourth Universal Periodic Review. The review included recommendations to strengthen protections for rights and freedoms, reduce arbitrary detention, and safeguard freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The arrest of Al-Janoubi and other protesters in March 2026 is a test of the government's willingness to implement these commitments, particularly in regions where environmental crises and resource management intersect with political and economic interests.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/murtadha-al-janoubi/

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement is a non-governmental organisation documenting the situation of human rights defenders in the Middle East and North Africa. This file is based on the public record of the case in the defenders archive.Status as recorded on 2026-03-04. To report an error: archive@humena.org