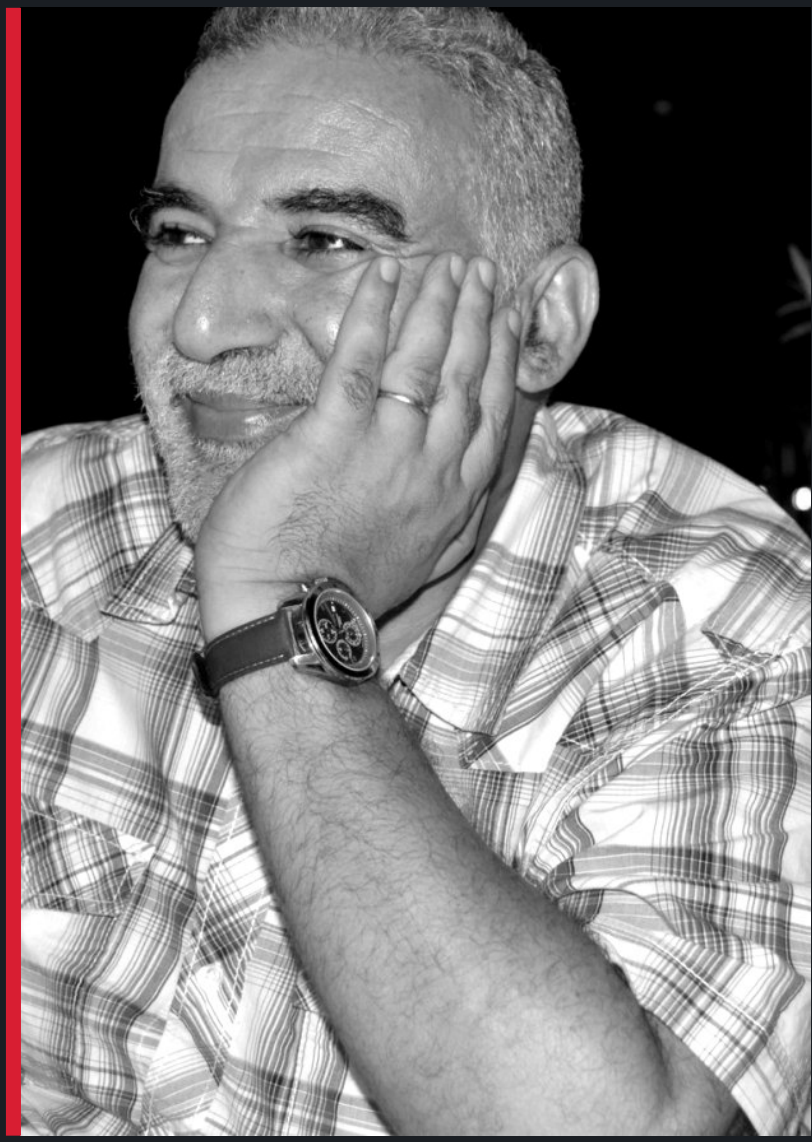

Advocacy dossier

Zied El Heni

زياد الهانى

Imprisoned (serving sentence) **Tunisia**

Tunisian journalist held in Mornaguia prison since April 2026, serving a one-year sentence for criticising a court ruling in a colleague's case. In October 2026 he was sentenced to four more years on terrorism charges in the audio leaks case, and his trial in a third case over municipal land in Carthage is adjourned to 16 December 2026.

01

The case at a glance

Tunisian journalist held in Mornaguia prison since April 2026, serving a one-year sentence for criticising a court ruling in a colleague's case. In October 2026 he was sentenced to four more years on terrorism charges in the audio leaks case, and his trial in a third case over municipal land in Carthage is adjourned to 16 December 2026.

Status **Imprisoned (serving sentence)**	Arrested **24 Apr 2026**	Country **Tunisia**

Sentence	One year in prison (Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code, 7 May 2026), upheld on appeal on 26 June 2026; according to RSF this also made his six-month suspended sentence of January 2024 enforceable. Four years in prison plus five years of police supervision on terrorism charges in the audio leaks case (first instance, 27 October 2026; he has said he will not appeal).
Charges	Violation of Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code for social media post and media commentary criticizing a judicial decision Audio leaks case: forming a terrorist organisation, disclosing secrets for a terrorist group, failing to report a terrorist offence, and communicating with agents of a foreign state Carthage municipal land case: abusing public office for undue advantage, harming the administration, breaching procedures, and forgery and use of forgery

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Release Zied El Heni immediately and unconditionally.

02 Drop all charges related to the peaceful exercise of fundamental rights.

03 Ensure unrestricted access to legal counsel, family, and adequate medical care while in detention.

02

Documented violations

Each violation and the international standard it breaks.

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

Denial of family visits UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rule 58

Judicial harassment UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Articles 9, 12

Press freedom violation International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19

Unfair trial International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14

03

How the case unfolded

13 September 2013

Arrest

Jailed after accusing a prosecutor on television

He was detained after accusing a prosecutor on television of fabricating evidence against a cameraman, and charged under Article 128 of the Penal Code.

16 September 2013

Release

Released on bail from Mornaguia prison

He was released on bail from Mornaguia prison after three days.

June 2023

Arrest

Detained for two nights over radio comments

In June 2023, he was detained for two nights over comments made on the radio programme “Émission Impossible”

June 2023

Release

Released after two nights in detention

In June 2023, he was detained for two nights over comments made on the radio programme “Émission Impossible” and then released.

September 2023

Investigation opened

Investigation opened after Facebook pages were monitored

the investigation was initiated after the Fifth Central Unit for Combating Information and Communication Technology Crimes monitored information circulating on at least two Facebook pages in September 2023

7 September 2023

Context

Discusses leaked recordings on Radio IFM

On his Radio IFM programme he discussed leaked recordings attributed to Mondher Ounissi, a former interim president of Ennahdha, saying he had contacted the people concerned to verify them. This broadcast later became the basis of the audio leaks case.

16 September 2023

Interrogation

Questioned by National Guard anti-terrorism unit

officers from the National Anti-Terrorism Unit of the National Guard questioned him that day in L'Aouina

16 September 2023

Device seized or searched

Hands over his phone

He then handed over his phone

December 2023

Re-arrest

Re-arrested after criticising the commerce minister

He was arrested again in December 2023 after criticizing then-Commerce Minister Kalthoum Ben Rejeb.

January 2024

Conviction

Six-month suspended prison sentence

received a six-month suspended prison sentence

10 January 2024

Release

Released on 10 January 2024

He was released on 10 January 2024

24 January 2024

Summons

Summoned before an anti-terrorism investigating judge

El Heni was summoned to appear on 30 January 2024 before the investigating judge of Office No. 12 at the anti-terrorism judicial pole of the Tunis Court of First Instance, to be questioned as a defendant, under a summons issued on 24 January 2024.

24 April 2026

Re-arrest

Arrested after answering a summons from the cybercrime unit

Arrested on 24 April 2026 after answering a summons from the Fifth Central Unit for Combating Information and Communication Technology Crime in Tunis, over a Facebook post criticising the judicial harassment of journalist Khalifa Guesmi.

24 April 2026

Conviction

Serving a one-year sentence under Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code

As recorded on 24 April 2026, El-Heni was serving a one-year prison sentence imposed under Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code.

26 April 2026

Pretrial detention ordered

Detention order issued outside judicial hours

A detention order was issued against El Heni on a Sunday evening, outside normal judicial working hours, over his public criticism of a court decision in the case of journalist Khalifa Guesmi.

26 April 2026

Hunger strike begins

Begins a hunger strike in Mornaguia prison

He began a hunger strike in Mornaguia prison in protest at his detention, according to his daughter. The date it ended has not been reported.

30 April 2026

Hearing

Trial hearing with multiple procedural violations

The trial hearing took place at the Tunis courthouse. Journalists were barred from entering the courtroom, El Heni's daughter was denied access, and his lawyer's pleadings were interrupted during the session.

7 May 2026

Conviction

Sentenced to one year in prison

The Criminal Chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance sentenced El Heni to one year in prison under Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code, on the same day the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on Tunisia to end its repression of journalists and civil society.

June 2026

Pretrial detention ordered

Detention ordered in a separate Carthage land case

The indictment chamber of the Tunis Court of Appeal issued detention orders against five defendants, including El Heni, a former Carthage municipal council member, in a case over the sale of municipal land in Carthage.

26 June 2026

Appeal: judgment upheld

Sentence upheld on appeal

On 26 June 2026, El-Heni’s sentence was upheld by a judge in the correctional chamber of the Tunis Court of Appeal.

30 June 2026

Hearing postponed

Trial postponed to an undetermined date

On 30 June 2026, the criminal chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance postponed the trial in the Carthage land case to an undetermined date.

30 June 2026

Pretrial detention renewed

Release requests rejected

In the Carthage land case, the release requests submitted by El Heni and his co-defendants were rejected.

2 October 2026

Hearing postponed

Carthage land case adjourned

The criminal chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance adjourned the Carthage municipal land case to 3 November 2026. He remained in detention.

27 October 2026

Conviction

Sentenced to four years on terrorism charges in audio leaks case

The criminal chamber specialised in terrorism cases at the Tunis Court of First Instance convicted him on four charges, including forming a terrorist organisation and failing to report a terrorist offence, over his 2023 radio discussion of leaked recordings attributed to Mondher Ounissi. It sentenced him to four years in prison followed by five years of police supervision. He appeared remotely from prison, and his lawyers said they were not allowed to plead.

28 October 2026

Other act

Announces he will not appeal the four-year sentence

In a statement from Mornaguia prison he announced that he would not appeal the four-year sentence in the audio leaks case, calling the case a judicial scandal.

5 November 2026

Other act

CPJ and 16 organisations call for his release

The Committee to Protect Journalists and 16 other organisations, including Amnesty International and MENA Rights Group, called for his immediate release, for his convictions to be overturned and for all pending charges related to his journalism to be dropped.

6 November 2026

Hearing postponed

Carthage land case adjourned to 16 December; he remains detained

The criminal chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance granted release to the former secretary general of the Carthage municipality and a former council member, but not to him, and adjourned to 16 December 2026.

04

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Zied El Heni remains in Mornaguia prison. He is serving the one-year sentence upheld on appeal on 26 June 2026, was sentenced on 27 October 2026 to four more years on terrorism charges in the audio leaks case, which he has said he will not appeal, and on 6 November 2026 the court in the Carthage land case kept him in detention and adjourned to 16 December 2026. Human Rights Watch lists him among journalists still behind bars with Mourad Zghidi.

Background and Work

Zied El Heni worked as a journalist in Tunisia during a period of profound institutional change. After 2011, Tunisia adopted Decree-Law 115, a legal framework intended to regulate the relationship between public authorities and journalistic work while protecting freedom of expression. El Heni's professional activity included media commentary, analysis of judicial decisions, and public discussion of cases involving fellow journalists. His engagement with the case of journalist Khalifa Guesmi exemplified this work: when Guesmi faced prosecution, El Heni offered public criticism of the judicial decision in that matter through both social media and expert media interventions.

The Prosecution and Arrest

On the evening of 26 April 2026, a Sunday, a detention order was issued against El Heni outside normal judicial working hours. The case stemmed from his public commentary criticizing a judicial decision in the Khalifa Guesmi case. Rather than applying Decree-Law 115 of 2011, which governs journalistic expression in Tunisia, the prosecution invoked Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code. That provision was originally intended to protect public communications networks, not to regulate journalistic work. The reliance on Article 86 formed part of a broader pattern in which general criminal provisions, including Decree-Law 54 of 2022, with its vague references to "false information" and "rumors", have been used to criminalize legitimate journalistic expression.

Legal Proceedings and Trial Violations

The trial hearing took place on 30 April 2026 at the Tunis courthouse. Journalists were prevented from entering the courtroom to cover the proceedings, despite the principle that hearings must be public. El Heni's daughter was denied access to the hearing. During the session, his lawyer's pleadings were interrupted. The Prosecutor of the Republic refused to meet with the President of the National Union of Tunisian Journalists, who had come to inquire about the exclusion of journalists from the courtroom. These procedural violations undermined fair trial guarantees and the right to a public hearing, protections enshrined in both Tunisian and international law.

Verdict and Sentence

On the evening of 7 May 2026, the Criminal Chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance sentenced El Heni to one year in prison under Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code. The verdict was issued on the same day that United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk publicly called on the Tunisian authorities to end their pattern of increasing repression against civil

society organizations, journalists, human rights defenders, political opponents, activists, and members of the judiciary through criminal proceedings and administrative obstacles. The timing underscored the international concern over the trajectory of civic and media freedoms in Tunisia. The prosecution of El Heni for criticizing a judicial decision raised additional concerns regarding judicial independence, as the judiciary itself became an actor in the prosecution of expression whose subject matter was a judicial practice.

Earlier and Later Cases

This was not his first prosecution. In September 2013 he was jailed for three days after accusing a prosecutor on television of fabricating evidence against a cameraman. In 2023 he was detained twice, over radio comments in June and over criticism of the commerce minister in December, and in January 2024 he received a six-month suspended sentence. On 26 June 2026 the Tunis Court of Appeal upheld the one-year sentence. In June 2026 the indictment chamber of the Tunis Court of Appeal also ordered his detention in a separate case over the sale of municipal land in Carthage, linked to his former seat on the municipal council. On 27 October 2026 the terrorism chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance sentenced him to four years in prison and five years of police supervision in the audio leaks case, which grew out of a 2023 radio discussion of leaked recordings. He announced that he would not appeal. On 6 November 2026 the court in the Carthage land case released two co-defendants but not him, and adjourned to 16 December 2026.

Context and Pattern of Repression

El Heni's case did not occur in isolation. In the four weeks surrounding his trial and conviction, the Tunisian authorities suspended the activities of the Tunisian League for Human Rights, a recipient of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize, and Avocats Sans Frontières. The Presidency of the Government filed a request to dissolve Al Khatt Association, which manages the independent media platform Inkyfada. Prison sentences were issued against journalists Ghassen Ben Khalifa (two years) and Sonia Dahmani (18 months), in addition to earlier convictions against journalists Mourad Zghidi and Borhen Bsaies. These successive measures revealed an accumulating pattern of redrawing the relationship between the state, independent media, and human rights organizations through interlinked judicial, administrative, and financial pressure. In the 2026 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, Tunisia ranked 137 out of 180 countries.

International Standards and Regional Context

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Tunisia is a State Party, protects criticism directed at public authorities, including the judiciary. General Comment 34 of the Human Rights Committee makes clear that imprisonment should not be a routine response to expression-related cases. El Heni's prosecution intersects with a broader pattern of judicial decisions and administrative measures in Tunisia, including the death sentence issued in October 2025 in relation to Facebook posts, prolonged detention of human rights defenders in cases related to migration and economic and social rights, and the prosecution of lawyers and judges in connection with their professional activities. Tunisia's current trajectory forms part of a wider regional pattern across the Middle East and North Africa, where general criminal provisions, including cybercrime laws, counterterrorism legislation, and broadly framed provisions on "harm to others", are used to criminalize legitimate expression outside the specific legal protections guaranteed by constitutional and international standards for

journalistic work.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit:https://humena.org/defenders/zied-el-heni/

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 2026-06-30. To report an error: archive@humena.org