October 29, 2026

Mr. Morris Tidball-Binz
Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

Mr. Pau Pérez-Sales
Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

Mr. Leopoldo Maldonado Gutiérrez
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Re: The 2019 death of Emirati poet Habib Al Sayegh

Dear Special Rapporteurs,

I am writing on behalf of Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN) to ask that you open an independent investigation into the death of Emirati poet and editor Habib Al Sayegh, who died in Abu Dhabi in August 2019, nine days after publishing a column calling Israel the enemy. A new book alleges that UAE security officers detained, tortured and killed him. No independent authority has publicly examined how he died.

DAWN is a nonprofit organization founded by the late Jamal Khashoggi that works to promote human rights and democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Rooted in rights movements across the MENA region, DAWN seeks to end U.S. support for repressive regimes and break new ground in the fight against impunity. Through research, litigation, advocacy, policy development and other tools, DAWN seeks to advance accountability, end complicity in repression, and realize the democratic aspirations of the people in the MENA region.

Al Sayegh, 64, was editor-in-chief of the newspaper Al Khaleej, chairman of the Emirates Writers Union and secretary general of the Arab Writers Union. In an August 11, 2019 column in Al Khaleej, he described Israel as “a real and natural enemy” and asked “who authorized the normalizers to speak on behalf of everyone?” Nine days later, the state news agency announced his death. The announcement did not state a cause.The UAE did not publicly respond in 2019 to questions around the circumstances of his death. One year later, the UAE normalized its relations with Israel.

On October 25, 2026, Simon & Schuster published Princes and Thieves by investigative journalist Matthew Cole. The book alleges, on the account of one confidential source and corroboration by at least two others, that security officers raided Al Sayegh’s Abu Dhabi home shortly after the publishing of the column, hooded him in front of his wife and took him to a detention facility. There, according to the book, UAE security forces beat and tortured him over

several days and he died on the floor of his cell between August 16 and August 19, days before the state announced his death. Officials then allegedly held the body for more than a day and barred the family from viewing it. Citing an unnamed source, the book claims that agents moved the body from the Al Bateen cemetery in Abu Dhabi, where he had originally been buried, exhumed it and reburied him in an unmarked desert grave so that his family could not pray there. The UAE government did not respond to the author's requests for comment.

DAWN has not independently verified the allegations in the book. The allegations, though, are consistent with the UAE's well-documented suppression of dissent and have not, to DAWN's knowledge, been independently investigated to date. They describe a death in state custody, torture, and retaliation for a newspaper column, which places them within your respective mandates. The UAE is a party to the Convention against Torture.

As part of your investigation, we ask you to press the UAE for Al Sayegh's death certificate, the recorded cause of death, any detention records and its response to the book's allegations, and to allow his family and an independent forensic expert to confirm the location and condition of his grave. We ask you to share your findings with the Human Rights Council and to seek accountability for any violations of international law you identify.

The book alleges that officials threatened Al Sayegh's family in 2019. Given the risk of reprisal, we encourage you to treat any contact with the family with particular care. We have asked the author to speak with your offices under the confidentiality your procedures provide, and we will facilitate that contact on request.

We would welcome a meeting with you and your teams to discuss this submission further and would welcome a reply by Friday, November 20.

Sincerely,

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Raed Jarrar
Advocacy Director
DAWN
WhatsApp/Signal: +1 (510) 932-0346
www.dawnmena.org
Twitter: @raedjarrar