

January 10, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Protecting journalists and press freedom in the Israel-Gaza war

Dear President Biden,

[At least 79 journalists and media workers](#) have been killed in Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon amid hostilities between Israeli forces and Palestinian and Lebanese armed groups since October 7, when Hamas-led fighters carried out horrific attacks and hostage-taking in Israel. The killing of so many journalists in so brief a period of time is shocking and horrific. It has obvious and profound implications for the ability of the public, including the American public, to be informed about a conflict with local, regional, and global implications. We are writing to entreat you to act immediately and decisively to promote the conditions for safe and unrestricted reporting on the hostilities.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), more journalists have been killed in the [first 10 weeks of the hostilities](#) than have ever been killed in a single country over an entire year. [Four journalists were killed in Hamas' assault on October 7, and at least 75 journalists have been killed since](#), almost all of them by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) according to CPJ. The U.S. State Department spokesperson recently said that the United States has not seen any evidence that Israel is intentionally targeting journalists. Yet [credible reports](#) by [human rights](#) and [media organizations](#) indicate that the IDF strikes in southern Lebanon on October 13 that killed [Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah](#) and injured six other journalists from Reuters, Al Jazeera, and Agence France-Presse were unlawful and apparently deliberate.<sup>1</sup> The IDF has also [acknowledged](#) deliberately targeting a car in which journalists were traveling on January 7, killing two journalists and seriously injuring a third. In at least two other cases, journalists [reported](#) receiving threats from Israeli officials and IDF officers before their family members were killed in Gaza. Of course, the targeted or indiscriminate killing of journalists, if committed deliberately or recklessly, is a war crime, and the International Criminal Court has [said](#) that it will investigate reports of war crimes committed against journalists in Gaza.

Journalists reporting on the war contend with challenges beyond the ever-present risk of death. These challenges include the refusal of Israel and Egypt to allow international journalists access to Gaza except under Israeli military escort (and even then, with

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<sup>1</sup> The IDF also deliberately targeted journalists before October 7, as in the case of American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, whose killing is the subject of an ongoing Justice Department investigation. See [CPJ report finds no accountability for journalists killed by the Israeli military over the past two decades](#), Comm. to Protect Journalists (May 9, 2023).

[restrictions on reporting](#)),<sup>2</sup> [internet shutdowns](#) that prevent news and testimonies from Gaza from reaching the outside world, [arbitrary detention](#), and [harassment and intimidation](#). In addition, the Israeli government [is requiring](#) media outlets in Israel to submit almost any detailed reporting on the war to its "Censorship" office for review, while banning reporting on significant topics of public interest related to the war in Gaza. It has also acted against its domestic press, for example, by [threatening to retaliate](#) against the country's oldest newspaper, Haaretz, for its coverage of the war, and threatening to shut down local bureau offices of foreign news agencies.

The United States has a long record of strong support for Israel, including civilian and military aid, and is clearly one of Israel's most influential partners. As such, the United States will be judged on how it has used that influence to ensure that all parties to the conflict abide by international law. Integral to this is the protection of journalists, not only because journalists are civilians, but also because they play an indispensable role in documenting and reporting on war crimes and other human rights violations.

We believe your administration can and must do more to effectively pursue accountability for journalists killed in the hostilities and to protect and support local and international journalists covering it. Our call echoes those of others to your administration, including [five U.S. senators](#), that the United States must do more to protect press freedom. The United States should use its considerable influence with the Israeli government to press them to ensure that journalists are able to safely document military operations and to shed light on their compliance with international humanitarian law.

We therefore urge you to act immediately and decisively to ensure that all of the parties respect the rights of journalists to report on the conflict. In particular, we ask you to:

- Publicly call on all parties to the armed conflict to: respect the right of journalists to report on the hostilities, ensure journalists' safety, allow all journalists seeking to evacuate from Gaza to do so, abjure the indiscriminate and deliberate killing of journalists, promptly and thoroughly investigate all attacks on journalists, and hold accountable individuals found to be responsible for them.
- Demand that Israel and Egypt provide international journalists with access to Gaza, and that Israel cease [communication blackouts](#) and take whatever steps are necessary to assure the safety of journalists admitted to Gaza as well as those already working there.
- Conduct thorough, transparent, and public assessments of the end-use of U.S. weapons and military assistance to Israel in the course of the hostilities to ensure/evaluate compliance with U.S. law or regulations, international law, and civilian protection responsibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> To our knowledge, CNN's Clarissa Ward is the only international journalist to have successfully evaded the ban on journalists entering Gaza independent of the IDF since the conflict began. See Clara Aberneithie, [CNN's Clarissa Ward enters Gaza in defiance of ban](#), PressGazette (Dec. 14, 2023).

- Demand that Israel allow the passage of personal protective equipment and materials used for newsgathering, such as helmets, flak jackets, phone chargers, eSIM cards, and laptops, to reporters in Gaza and the West Bank.
- Support swift, transparent, and independent investigations into the killing of all journalists and ending the longstanding pattern of impunity in the killings of journalists by the IDF, including Palestinian-American Shireen Abu Akleh.

Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Respectfully,

Committee to Protect Journalists  
Freedom House  
Freedom of the Press Foundation  
Human Rights Watch  
Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University  
Reporters Without Borders

CC: Jake Sullivan, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs  
David Satterfield, Special Envoy for Middle East Humanitarian Issues