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Journalists under fire

Press freedom comes at a deadly price in Gaza. Europe cannot remain indifferent to the loss of so many

Between 2006 and 2024, over 1 700 journalists have been killed around the world, with close to nine out of 10 cases of these killings remaining judicially unresolved. It is in recognition of the far-reaching consequences of impunity that the United Nations General Assembly in 2013 proclaimed 2 November as the 'International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists'.

The journalist Heba al-Abdallah was born in Khan Yunis in 1993. At Al-Azhar University, she obtained a bachelor's degree in Arabic language and media. The defence of her master's thesis awaited. Heba was married and had a daughter, Judy. She was a news anchor and presenter at a radio station, collaborated with a university and was on the board of directors of the Social Media Club in Palestine. She also worked on the working women's file for the Subordinate Workers' Movement.

'These days are among the most difficult moments that a person can live through, under the sounds of shells and skirmishes, the remains of houses that are being shot at and the ruins that fall on our heads, with the smell of gunpowder and gas, not to mention the sound of tanks moving past us', she wrote. Individuals should not be reduced to numbers, as 'each of us has dreams, ambitions and memories'.

Everything stopped for her in one moment. Heba and little Judy died when an Israeli bomb hit their home, ending a life dedicated to empowering women and youth to engage in social and political work. On that day in January, Heba became the 111th journalist killed in the war in Gaza — a tally that the International Federation of Journalists has now extended to 133 media workers. Yet, she and the others like her must not remain mere statistics.

Deadliest period for journalists

This toll, which includes two Israeli and three Lebanese as well as the Palestinian journalists, has made the period the deadliest for journalists

anywhere in the world in the decades since their organisations began collecting data. We have photographs of colleagues killed wearing equipment marked with a large PRESS sign and targeted attacks have been witnessed.

Two days before the murder of Heba and her daughter, an Israeli airstrike killed two journalists. They included Hamza al-Dahdouh, son of the head of *Al Jazeera*'s office in Gaza, Wael al-Dahdouh, who has become a symbol of the suffering of Palestinian journalists. The scale of his family's tragedy is horrific: after his home was destroyed, a refugee camp where some had taken shelter was hit, resulting in the deaths of his wife, 15-year-old son, seven-year-old daughter and one-year-old grandson. Wael al-Dahdouh continued to report. In December, he was injured and his cameraman Samer Abudaqa was killed. Wael continued to report. Then, in January, his eldest son, Hamza, also a journalist, was killed too.

Attacks on Palestinian journalists are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of systematic violence.

Can we just turn our heads? Add a number to the grim statistics and continue with our daily lives, without pausing to reflect on the fates of our colleagues – for those of us who are practising journalists – and trying to stop this horror?

On 7 October 2023, Hamas' armed wing carried out numerous, co-ordinated attacks on civilians and took hostages in Israel. It was an unforgivable and abhorrent assault, involving murders, torture, rapes and kidnappings of young people enjoying a festival, just like our sons and daughters.

Israel's response, continuing to this day, has been to erase an entire people from the face of the earth, indiscriminately killing civilians, including many thousands of children. Unprecedented measures have been taken to restrict media freedom, effectively resulting in a censorship regime.

Attacks on Palestinian journalists are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of systematic violence. Each of us must pause, read at least the names of these people and think about their lives, their families, their dreams. These are people who chose to pursue journalism to report the truth from Palestine. Their work is a profession but, even more, a mission to preserve freedom of information, a crucial pillar of democracy. We must encourage everyone to think about ways to support peace and freedom in Palestine and Israel.

Concrete action

That is why the European Federation of Journalists and its affiliates have joined the initiative of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and several other organisations to send a letter to the European Union, calling for concrete action against Israel for its attacks on journalists. We demand the suspension of the association agreement between the EU and Israel and sanctions against those responsible for these terrible crimes. This is not just an appeal for justice but also for accountability mechanisms, to ensure that such crimes are not repeated.

Freedom of the press is a right that comes with the responsibility to protect those who risk their lives to keep the world informed. We must insist on the protection of journalists in Palestine and ensure that the international community responds to Israel's severe violations of human rights and of its obligations under international humanitarian law. Systematic abuses have been documented by Israeli, Palestinian and international non-governmental organisations, as well as United Nations experts.

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The letter to EU leaders records that the CPJ has found that the Israeli Defense Forces have directly targeted and killed at least five journalists and are investigating at least 10 other deaths that indicate a possible IDF target. It stresses: 'Targeted or indiscriminate killing of journalists, if done intentionally or recklessly, is a war crime.'

The letter highlights the unprecedented nature in modern times of the ban on journalists entering Gaza. Israel, it says, has arrested at least 49 journalists and other media workers – with growing claims of torture and abuse while detained – while in Israel itself, press freedom is coming under increasing restriction.

In addition to suspending the association agreement, therefore, EU leaders should support the demands for media freedom. That means upholding the freedom to report, protecting the lives of journalists, ensuring accountability and ending impunity. Europe must not collectively remain indifferent to the loss of so many, such as Heba, who once had 'dreams, ambitions and memories'.

This article was first published on Social Europe.



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