A Staggering Number of Journalists Have Been Killed by Israel During the War on Gaza

Journalists play a critical role in educating and informing the public during times of war, helping provide first-hand accounts that shape public opinion and shed light on what is really taking place. Their work is something that is especially important when trying to document human rights abuses and uncover war crimes. They also often times offer a non-state influenced perspective, a key task as information can be skewed by the countries and actors themselves who are waging war. In this way, journalists are watchdogs that fact-check and hold public figures to account, as evident through the reporting during conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and today in Ukraine and Gaza. War zones have always been treacherous sites for reporters that can lead to injury and death, but journalists are intended to be afforded protections, in the same manner that civilians are. Article 79 of the Geneva Convention states that journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in zones of armed conflict are civilians, and as such, they are granted the full scope of protection under international humanitarian law. However, for embedded journalists in Gaza, their ability to safely and accurately report has been extremely violated by Israeli forces. Palestinian civilians have not been afforded humanitarian protections either, with the death toll in Gaza now surpassing 30,000 – many of whom are women and children.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), to date at least 94 journalists and media workers – including 89 Palestinians, 2 Israelis, and 3 Lebanese – have been killed since the onset of the war. This tragedy reverses the global downward trend of journalist deaths. To put this number of journalist deaths into perspective, the Iraq War saw 229 journalists killed over eight years, with 56 journalist deaths in 2006 being the record high in a single year. The disturbing number of journalists killed in Gaza has also surpassed the total number of journalists killed in the two-decade-long wars in Vietnam (63) and Afghanistan (76). The CPJ reports that the conflict has claimed the lives of more journalists in three months than have ever been killed in a single country over an entire year, at a rate of 0.72 killed every day. The War in Ukraine for comparison, which has been ongoing for the past two years, has seen 17 journalists killed at a rate of 0.02 per day. The killing of journalists in Gaza is singlehandedly raising the global total of journalists killed. The 2023 global total is the highest since 2015, and is a 44% increase on 2022's figures. This is a worrying and alarming trend, as journalists are forced to risk their lives to provide their critical public service.

What is particularly shocking, is the fact that Israeli forces have not attempted to avoid killing journalists either. When asked if their journalists would be protected during the conflict, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) told Reuters and Agence France-Presse (AFP) that they could not guarantee the safety of journalists in Gaza, sending a signal that Israel's offensive is targeting indiscriminately and that nowhere is safe for journalists. There is evidence to suggest that some of these killings have been targeted as well. Issam Abdallah, a Lebanese visual journalist for Reuters, was killed while covering cross-border fire on October 13th even though Abdallah's group was reporting from a location where no fighting was taking place. There are several other instances of Israeli forces purposely targeting journalists, accusing them of being terrorists or aiding Hamas despite no substantiation to these reprehensible claims, and no credible evidence ever being produced. The killing of journalists, like the indiscriminate targeting of civilian infrastructure and sites, is one of many breaches of international law since the beginning of the war that could be used as evidence at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Another measure of journalistic and press freedom that Israel has violated is the jailing of journalists. Israel has arrested dozens of journalists, and was tied for the sixth-largest jailer of journalists in 2023, along with Iran. Last year in 2023, 320 journalists were imprisoned worldwide, marking the second-highest figure since 1992 (the first being 2022). These are troubling numbers that put impartial and investigative journalism at risk, and threaten democratic best practices. Recently, 11-year-old Sumayya Wushah has begun reporting the conditions on the ground for Palestinians, providing a beacon of hope that journalism and the truth will persevere.