



**Protecting Journalists' Right of Freedom of Speech, and
Access to Conflict Zones, and Safe Treatment**



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Overview

When civilians are facing attacks, journalists are also indiscriminatorily attacked regardless of their professional status. Journalists' rights are codified and outlined in several international legal frameworks. For instance, Article 79 of Additional Protocol I of the Third Geneva Convention states that journalists are entitled to all rights and protections granted to civilians in international armed conflicts; while UN Security Council's Resolution 2222 explicitly affirms protection for journalists in armed conflicts (International Committee of the Red Cross, "Article 79 - Measures of Protection for Journalists")("International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists"). Attack on journalists is a form of attack on press freedom, as it silences individuals and restricts the public from the right to information.

Journalists are operating in conflict zones under extreme risks, including being kidnapped, arbitrarily detained, and even killed. Even with the protection of international laws, 85% of murders of journalists go unpunished on the global stage. At the end of 2025, more than 300 journalists were imprisoned worldwide – the fifth year in a row. In those imprisoned journalists, eight are sentenced to life, while one is on death row ("International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists"). In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alone, 186 journalists have been killed – the deadliest period for journalists since the Committee to Protect Journalists began recording such data in 1992 (Committee to Protect Journalists, "2025 Journalist Jailings Remain Stubbornly High; Harsh Prison Conditions Pervasive - Committee to Protect Journalists")(Høiby and Ottosen).

In some cases, journalists are denied access to conflict zones as a whole. As working conditions at conflict zones continue to worsen, a decreasing amount of journalists are not willing nor authorised to cover a conflict. For instance, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel has banned all independent press from entering Gaza since the war began in 2023. This raises the issue of state-controlled or manipulated media, since only the journalists who were already in Gaza prior to the war or those who are appointed by the Israeli government have access to the conflict zone (Kat Lonsdorf). Those who are not state-appointed also means that they have been affected by the war since they are not protected by the law. With their physical safety already at risk, this can limit their ability to report on the war.



Definitions of important terms

Journalist

A person who gathers information in forms of audio, text or pictures to write news articles or stories for a newspaper, magazine or radio to disseminate to the public (Cambridge Dictionary)(AAFT).

Civilian Status

Under the International Humanitarian Law, civilians are defined as individuals who do not belong to armed forces. Individuals who hold civilian statuses shall not be harmed or attacked. Civilians can lose their immunity if they participate in hostilities. Additionally, if there is doubt in whether or not someone is a civilian, they shall be presumed as one (Vance)(International Committee of the Red Cross, “Practice Relating to Norma 6.”).

Impunity

Exemption from punishment from any forms of negative consequences for illegal actions under laws. This allows for violations of laws and international treaties with no fear of retribution, and therefore fuels the lack of protection for journalists (Medicins Sans Frontiers).

Arbitrary Detention

Deprivation of liberty, specifically whenever a person is being held without his or her free consent. It also indicates that there was no legal justification, due process and in violation of international law (United Nations, “About Arbitrary Detention”).

Information Blackout

Total, partial, deliberate or accidental suspension of communication, including: shut down of networks, block certain platforms or slowing down internet speed – which could prevent the spread of video (UN News).

International Humanitarian Law

The IHL’s purpose lies in limiting the effects of armed conflicts for those who are not part of, or no longer part of the war. IHL has been derived from the four Geneva Conventions of 1949; it is a legally binding set of rules (International Committee of the Red Cross, “Geneva Conventions and the Law”).



Timeline of key events

1899-1907: Mention of Newspaper Correspondents and Reporters for the First Time

In 1899 and 1907, “newspaper correspondents and reporters” were mentioned in the Hague Conventions Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and their annexes – the first time in history of international humanitarian law where journalists were mentioned. They were granted rights to be treated as a Prisoner of War (POW), meaning they are treated with dignity and distinguished from criminals (International Committee of the Red Cross, “Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and Its Annex: Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907.”).

1949: Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

The UDHR codified some of the rights and freedom that should be applicable for all human beings. In Article 19, it specifically states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”. As the UDHR applies to all human beings, this makes this article applicable to citizen journalists (United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations”).

1991: Adoption of the Windhoek Declaration

Drafted by a group of African newspaper journalists in 1991, the Windhoek Declaration is a statement of press freedom principles. They defined media freedom as: media free from government control, multiple media outlets to prevent monopolies, and a legal and political environment where journalists can work without fear (Security).

2006: UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1738 on Protection of Journalists

This resolution is the first of the UNSC’s that dedicates to the protection of journalists. It reaffirms the civilian status of journalists unless they participate in hostilities (UN Security Council).

2012: UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists

This UN Plan of Action was created upon the requests of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). It aims to create a safe environment for journalists in both conflict and non-conflict situations (United Nations, “UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity”).

2015: UN Security Council Resolution 2222



This resolution is considered a follow-up of the UNSC Resolution 1738 from 2006. In Resolution 1738, the connection between the UDHR and journalists rights was not established, while in this resolution it was. Additionally, while Resolution 1738 condemned state attacks on journalists, there was no mention of the impunity issues that arose. In Resolution 2222, the UNSC affirms that media equipment should be considered civilian property and therefore should not be targeted. This resolution is often referred to as the most comprehensive resolution that codifies journalists rights to date (UN Security Council).

2021: The Pegasus Project

NSO group is an Israeli tech company that created the spyware Pegasus that were sold to governments. In July 2021, an anonymous source leaked 50,000+ phone numbers to two non-profit groups: Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International. The list contained phone numbers that are “selected as people of interest” by the NSO group’s government clients – it included 189 journalists. To prove the list of phone numbers had actual association with Pegasus, more than 80 journalists from 17 media organizations in 10 countries collaborated, and through Amnesty Tech, they found traces of Pegasus on many of those phones (Amnesty International).

2022: Killing of Shireen Abu Akleh

Shireen Abu Akleh was a Palestinian-American journalist reporting for Al Jazeera. She was killed on May 11, 2022, while covering an Israeli military raid in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank, Palestine. Multiple witness accounts that the team was wearing blue bulletproof vests and a PRESS helmet – she was shot right below the helmet, the only exposed area of her head. Initially, the IDF suggested that Palestinian militants might be responsible, but in a report that the IDF released four months later, they suggested that there is a high possibility that she was accidentally hit by an IDF gunman (IDF).

2024: Deadliest Year Recorded for Journalists

2024 was deemed as the deadliest year recorded for journalists since the Committee to Protect Journalists began collecting data in 1992. 124 journalists were killed in 2024 – for comparison, 63 journalists were killed in the Vietnam war over a 20-year period (Anderson and Trembath). This indicates not only the lack of protection for journalists, but also the growing threat towards flow of information. CPJ found that at least 24 of the 124 were targeted killings (Committee to Protect Journalists, “2024 Is Deadliest Year for Journalists in CPJ History; Almost 70% Killed by Israel - Committee to Protect Journalists”).



Position of key nations

Israel:

According to Reporters Without Borders, Israel was ranked 101 out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom in 2024 – its ranking dropped to 112 because of its repressive laws, targeted intimidation, and unsafe environment for journalists (Reporters Without Borders, “Israel”).

In May 2024, Israeli Parliament passed a law that allowed temporary closure of foreign broadcasters considered to be a “threat to national security”, which was used to shut down Al Jazeera’s – an Arabic independent news channel – in Israel. This also allowed Israel to continue their crackdown on Palestinian media through accusing them of links to Hamas and designating them as terrorist organizations (Human). On January 26, 2026, the Israeli government approved an extension to the ban on Al Jazeera for another 90 days, now including digital platforms of the organization (Al Jazeera). This ban does not only apply to Palestinian journalists – but all international journalists. By excusing the barring of international journalists to the conflict zone in Gaza by security reasons, Israel is able to prevent the documentation through international monitoring tools. Even through the ceasefire that started on October 11, 2025, Israel continued to deny journalists access, with special exceptions for limited tours under Israeli army supervision.

On top of restricting journalists rights to Gaza, Israel is also preventing other forms of documentation by the entry of the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, forensic teams, and importation of tools for exhuming bodies and identifying victims (Committee to Protect Journalists, “CPJ Calls on Israel to Lift Ban on Foreign Journalists and Stop Targeting Broadcasters - Committee to Protect Journalists”).

China:

China’s ranking on press freedom is consistently ranked low due to the country’s prioritization on national interest and security. Journalists are also expected to adhere to Xi Jinping and his Communist party’s ideology, making it impossible for journalists to report on diverse perspectives.

Although Article 35 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China guarantees press and speech freedom to a certain extent, Article 51 of the Constitution stipulates that citizens, when exercising their freedoms and rights, must not infringe upon the interests of the state (James A. Dorn)(University of Minnesota Human Rights Library). By placing these restrictions on press



and speech freedom, the Chinese state can justify its actions on censoring media through excuses of national security.

All major Chinese news outlets, including: Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China National Radio (CNR), and newspapers China Daily, People's Daily and the Global Times, are all state owned. On top of being state-owned, they are also sent a detailed notice that includes editorial guidelines and censored topics daily by the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As for news online, Regulations on the Administration of Internet News Information Service was passed in 2017 for online news providers to comply with. The regulations require them to obtain licenses and follow strict guidelines, which exerts state control over online press freedom as well (Reporters Without Borders, "China").

The CCP also controls the press landscape through surveillance, coercion, intimidation and harassment to stop independent journalists from covering "sensitive" issues deemed by the party. Currently, more than 100 journalists are detained in the country (Chen). This is evident in the case of Jimmy Lai – the founder of Apple Daily, a Hong Kong newspaper. Lai has been sentenced to 20 years in prison under the CCP-imposed National Security Law – he was found guilty for conspiring to collude with foreign forces and publishing seditious material (Al Jazeera). Such cases are not the first in Mainland China, but definitely among the first in Hong Kong since the pro-democracy protests of 2019-2020.

Russia:

Following the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Federation passed two emergency laws restricting press freedom: Article 207.3, which criminalises the dissemination of false information of the Russian forces – however the federation defines anything that contradicts the official military statements as "false", and Article 280.3, which punishes any public sentiments that undermines the army's reputation. Violations of such laws results in imprisonment, which creates an environment of fear for journalists working in Russia reporting on the Russo-Ukrainian war (Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation).

Similarly to China's firewall, Russia also blocked social media platforms and internet browsers on several locations, including: Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, the Tor browser, to restrict the flow of non-state information (Glynn). With its social media bans, Russian citizens are barred from accessing foreign news and information not distributed by the state, which is a kind of restriction to press, and also to information.



Maria Ponomarenko, a correspondent for independent news site RusNews, was sentenced to 6 years in prison for reporting on a bombing in Mairupol, Ukraine, on charges of spreading disinformation about the Russian army. In March 2025, she was sentenced to an additional 22 months in prison after being convicted of using violence against prison staff. In 2023, a psychological and psychiatric examination revealed that Ponomarenko has a form of personality disorder and needs psychiatric assistance, which she was denied. Additionally, she spoke about a suicide attempt after being bullied by prison staffs (Committee to Protect Journalists, “Russian Journalist Maria Ponomarenko Sentenced to 22 Additional Months in Prison - Committee to Protect Journalists”). This illustrates the unjust and abuse that journalists face within the Russian penalty system. It is also worth noting that Russia is among the five worst jailers of journalists globally.

Norway:

Norway – unlike China, Russia, and Israel – is consistently ranked first in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, “Index”). In the political landscape, politicians generally refrain from dismissing unfavourable coverage as “fake news”. As regards to the legal protection of press freedom, Article 100 of the Norwegian Constitution prohibits censorship, guarantees free speech, and mandates active state promotion of open, informed public discourse. Press freedom and freedom of speech are also protected by several other laws (Reporters Without Borders, “Norway”).

The Norwegian government also showed concern in the lack of journalistic freedom in Gaza – Norwegian foreign affairs minister Espen Barth Eide notably urged the government to “use all political and diplomatic means” to pressure Israel to safeguard journalists and ensure press freedom in Gaza (Jordaan). The country’s stance on the issue of impunity is strong as well. In a statement published by Norway and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), they stated that “impunity is the greatest obstacle to ensuring the safety of journalists. Every act of violence that goes uninvestigated and unpunished is an open invitation for further violence” (Norway and the OSCE).

Furthermore, Norway is also an active participant in the five-year “Journalists Matter” campaign led by the Council of Europe. In May 2025, in order to support the efforts of the campaign, the Norwegian government launched a national strategy named “Expression Preparedness”, which encourages “open and enlightened public discourse” (The Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality). At the upcoming World Expression Forum, Norway will also be leading a session on “The Freedom to Disagree” – which will address how governments can protect journalists in an



increasingly polarized society, where disagreement with the government often results in threat and harassment (Gjone).

Myanmar:

As of the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Myanmar ranks 171st out of 180 countries; it is also ranked the second-worst jailer of journalists in the world after China (Crispin/CPJ). The junta has also enacted an electoral law that imposes punishments, including the death penalty, for anyone opposing or disrupting the elections it has pledged to hold in December, which includes any offline or online speech that questions the legitimacy of the elections – though this law does not directly limit journalists rights, it is significantly impacting the ability for journalists to report the truth (Strangio). In 2021, the junta also introduced changes to the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code Section 505A, which prohibits causing fear, spreading false news and agitating crimes against a government employee, all punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. This penal code has been used to charge journalists, student leaders, and others who express dissatisfaction with the military regime (The Centre for Law and Democracy).

Many journalists have also been arbitrarily detained or killed due to their journalistic work. Between February 2021 and January 2026, seven journalist have died due to torture from the military coup. As of January, twenty-seven journalists remain imprisoned (Progressive Voice). With the risks of their license being revoked, being arbitrarily arrested by the military coup, and treated inhumanely in prison, Myanmar is currently not at all a safe environment for journalists to work in.



Suggested solutions

Although international laws are established in place to protect journalists, it is clearly not effective enough, given the amount of journalists still imprisoned, tortured, and murdered worldwide. In other words, long-term structural change to legally binding international laws is needed – this includes: establishing a safe environment for journalists both online and offline, strengthening access to conflict zones and putting an complete end to impunity. In an article published by Reporters Without Borders in December 2025, they revealed that 503 journalists are still detained worldwide – and 67 journalists killed in total last year, with the majority of killings in the Middle East (Reporters Without Borders, “2025, a Deadly Year for Journalists: This Is Where Hate and Impunity Lead”).

First and foremost, journalists’ safety must be the priority in conflict zones. UNESCO’s Media Safe Spaces Initiative, established through the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), and in cooperation with the Global Media Defence Fund and the Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists have addressed their safety issues by assisting displaced or exiled journalists to safe accommodation, and access safety equipment, psychological support, legal assistance and immigration or asylum advice, basic medical care, and financial support. Member states should be urged and pressured to donate to the fund in order to continue this effort carried out by UNESCO (UNESCO, “Safety of Journalists in Crisis and Conflict-Situations”). Their safety in digital spaces must also not be compromised. In this increasingly digitalized world, foundational international treaties such as the Geneva Convention should be updated to ban the use of military-grade spyware, like Pegasus, by governments – as it significantly violates journalistic freedom and their privacy.

Secondly, it is impossible to completely address journalists’ rights without ending impunity when nine out of ten killings of journalists go unpunished (United Nations, “International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists | United Nations”). In order to effectively hold states accountable for their crimes, an UN-mandated task force could independently investigate the cases of killings of journalists in cases where the responsible governments are unwilling to investigate. Currently, although the Universal Jurisdiction does protect murdered journalists to some degree, most countries ignore these cases because they are given the option to, or they simply are not willing to take the diplomatic risk. However, the optional aspect of the Universal Jurisdiction in addressing impunity diminishes the protection it grants journalists. Therefore, if the UN-mandated task force discovers concrete evidence of a state committing the killing, it should be mandatory for a neutral state to address it by holding the responsible state accountable in the International Criminal Court (OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media).



Finally, journalists' access to conflict zones should be strengthened, as oftentimes they are prevented access by governments who are active participants in conflicts. It is suggested to grant journalists the same protected access to conflict zones as humanitarian workers, as their work is vital in delivering the truth to the public, and also documenting any wrongdoings of the government. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as previously stated, many international journalists are barred from entering Gaza, leaving local journalists afraid to continue their jobs as they are extremely vulnerable to surveillance and threats from the states. If "blue corridors" are implemented, this will protect journalists going both in and out of the conflict zones. "Blue corridors" are vital in wars as it ensures that there are witnesses of wrongdoings committed by states that are not direct victims or involved in the war even if states attempt to block access to investigation forces from the UN.



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