



## Statement on Threats to Journalists Worldwide

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In the wake of the apparent assassination of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israel Defense Forces soldiers on the West Bank, the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention feels compelled to underscore the importance of a free press to the prevention of genocide, to accountability for mass atrocity crimes, and to the cause of sustainable global peace.

Shireen Abu Akleh was a 25-year veteran TV reporter for Al Jazeera Arabic. She is one of between twenty-four and forty-five journalists who have been killed, and hundreds who have been injured, by Israeli forces over the past twenty-five years in Palestine. Her murder has garnered particular outrage worldwide due to her high profile as well as the apparently peaceful context in which she was shot.

2022 has been a deadly year so far for journalists worldwide. Many journalists have been killed in the context of open conflicts. Between February 24 and April 5, the Committee to Protect Journalists estimates that fourteen journalists and media workers have been killed in the war in Ukraine. Other journalists have been killed for threatening vested interests in countries that are not at war. For example, as of May 10, eleven journalists have been murdered in Mexico this year.

One of the most important roles of journalists is speaking truth to power. This role puts them in the line of fire, either because they shine a light on the behavior of armed groups and armed nations or because they are inconvenient to political and economic interests. Without the courageous work of journalists, the human security concerns that develop into mass atrocity and genocide are able to run rampant without public scrutiny. Attacks on the press that are allowed to continue with impunity undermine the work of peacemakers worldwide.

Swift accountability is the only antidote to continued attacks on the press. However, the Committee to Protect Journalists' Global Impunity Index has found that over the past ten years, *81 percent of murders of journalists are never prosecuted.*

In 2021, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and South Sudan were the most dangerous countries for journalists. In 2022, Mexico and Ukraine have been the most deadly.

Despite the importance of countering impunity for attacks on the press, Israel's military has stated that it will not conduct an internal investigation into Abu Akleh's killing because such an investigation would lead to opposition within Israeli society. Instead of undergoing an

investigation, the IDF attacked mourners and pallbearers at Abu Akleh's funeral two days after her assassination.

Supporters of press freedom have been exploring other options for redress. Some US House Democrats have called for an FBI investigation, given Abu Akleh's US citizenship. The Palestinian Authority is planning to refer the case to the International Criminal Court (ICC). This complaint will follow on the heels of a previous formal complaint filed before Abu Akleh's killing by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate (PJS), and the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP) that accused Israel of committing war crimes against journalists. The ICC Prosecutor's Office formally acknowledged receipt of that complaint on 25 April, weeks before Abu Akleh was targeted.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention calls on the ICC to use its jurisdiction to prosecute gross human rights violators who target journalists and freedom of the press, particularly in the context of genocidal violence. We further call for the United States and other traditional allies of Israel to support ICC jurisdiction and pursue all available avenues to find justice for Shireen Abu Akleh. Israel's culture of impunity serves neither Palestinians nor Israelis, no matter what Israeli public opinion may suggest. When the majority opinion within a country is convinced of its own impunity and the justification of its mass atrocities, formal accountability is often the only way to begin the long and hard push for justice and sustainable peace.