

July 22, 2024

Mitch McConnell
Senate Republican Leader
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Mike Johnson
Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives
568 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Sent via email

Dear Senator McConnell and Speaker Johnson,

We are writing to request that, during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting with the U.S. Congress [at your invitation](#) on July 24, you urge the government of Israel to ensure that journalists are protected, in keeping with Israel's and the United States' international obligations. Nearly ten months into a conflict plagued with unprecedented numbers of journalists killed amidst a shocking civilian death toll, the United States should ensure that Israel ceases the killing of journalists, allows immediate and independent media access to the occupied Gaza Strip, and takes urgent steps to enable the press to report freely throughout Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Since October 7, 2023, when fighters led by Hamas' armed wing carried out horrific attacks and hostage-taking in Israel, the Netanyahu administration has taken an unprecedented series of steps to curtail media freedom that has effectively resulted in the establishment of a censorship regime. Whether tacit or explicit, U.S. support for Israel's actions against journalists and journalism directly undermines the United States' longstanding commitment to press freedom and human rights.

The ongoing violations by Israel requiring urgent action include:

- **Unprecedented killings of journalists:** Press freedom organizations including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have recorded the [killings of over 100 Palestinian journalists and media workers](#) in Gaza, as well as two Israeli and three Lebanese journalists, since October 7, making it the deadliest period for journalists in the decades that these organizations have been gathering data. Many of these journalists were wearing press insignia when killed. The decimation and displacement of Gaza's press corps, has meant that [fewer local journalists are left](#) to report on the hostilities in Gaza.

- **Targeted killings of journalists, including a targeted attack that injured a U.S. citizen:** The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) directly targeted and killed at least three journalists,¹ and CPJ is researching at least 10 other deaths that indicate possible IDF targeting.² Other organizations such as RSF believe the [number of targeted killings may be higher](#). Documenting and verifying the details necessary to conclude that targeting has occurred, while access to Gaza is constrained and reporting conditions [remain dire](#), is difficult. The targeted or indiscriminate killing of journalists, if committed deliberately or recklessly, is a war crime. In one of these attacks, an IDF tank strike killed Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah in southern Lebanon on October 13, as documented by extensive independent investigations by human rights and media organizations and supported by extensive [forensic video analysis](#).³ Six other journalists were injured, including [Dylan Collins](#), a U.S. citizen from Vermont. All were wearing press vests at the time of the attack.
- **Ban on independent media access to Gaza:** While some restrictions on reporting are common in war, the effective total ban on journalists entering Gaza — both foreign nationals and Israeli and Palestinian journalists — is unprecedented in modern times. Journalists have been able to report from the frontlines in almost every major conflict over the past three decades: from Ukraine to Rwanda. By comparison, despite the Israeli government press office issuing media credentials to approximately [2,800 international journalists](#) to enter Israel since the conflict began, only select journalists have been allowed to enter the Gaza Strip — all under Israeli military escort and with [restrictions on reporting](#).⁴ Consequently, more than 70 news outlets and civil society organizations have recently [urged that Israel](#) grant independent access to Gaza.
- **Record-high arbitrary detentions:** Since October 7, Israel has arrested [at least 48 journalists and media workers](#) — often without charge — in what they and their attorneys say is retaliation for their journalism and commentary. At least 15 are being held under administrative detention, a policy under which a military commander may detain an individual without charge, typically for six months, on the grounds of preventing them from committing a future offense, and extended an unlimited number of times. The use of the procedure has repeatedly been declared a form of [arbitrary detention by the UN](#).

¹ The three journalists targeted and killed are Reuters journalist and Lebanese national [Issam Abdallah](#) in southern Lebanon and Palestinian journalists [Hamza Al Dahdouh and Mustafa Thuraya](#) in Gaza. The IDF also deliberately targeted journalists before Oct. 7, as in the case of American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, whose killing is the subject of an ongoing Justice Department investigation. See [CPI report finds no accountability for journalists killed by the Israeli military over the past two decades](#), Committee to Protect Journalists (May 9, 2023).

² Other organizations such as RSF believe the [number of targeted killings may be higher](#); however, documenting and verifying the details necessary to conclude that targeting has occurred, while access to Gaza is constrained and reporting conditions [remain dire](#), is difficult.

³ See independent investigations by [Reuters](#), [AFP](#), [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and [Reporters Without Borders](#).

⁴ A small number of journalists have entered Gaza whilst embedded with the Israeli military on very short visits that offer a limited and curated view of the conflict, and a CNN correspondent briefly reported from inside Gaza after entering with an Emirati aid group. See Patrick Kingsley [A Glimpse Inside A Devastated Gaza](#), New York Times (Jan. 9, 2024). The ban on journalists' access has been [upheld](#) by Israel's Supreme Court. Access from Egypt is also impossible.

- **Enforced disappearance:** Palestinian journalists [Nidal Al-Wahidi](#) and [Haitham Abdelwahid](#) have been [detained by Israeli authorities](#) since October 7, while they were reporting on the Hamas-led attack in southern Israel. Since then, the Israeli authorities have refused to disclose information about their whereabouts, the legal grounds for their arrest, or even confirmation that they are still alive.
- **Allegations of torture and mistreatment:** There are a growing number of allegations of [torture](#) and [mistreatment](#) by journalists arrested or detained by Israeli authorities. While further research is needed to confirm these allegations, they are consistent with the [evidence of systemic ill-treatment](#) of detainees in Israeli custody.
- **Censorship and egregious limitations of media freedom:** More broadly, legal impediments and significant impairments to independent reporting within Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories have expanded since October 7. In Israel, [press freedom](#) has been curtailed by an increasing number of [banned](#) articles, government [officials' anti-press rhetoric](#), alleged attempts to seemingly [control](#) news outlets, and [attacks on Israeli reporters](#), among other threats. In April 2024, Israel also passed a law that empowers the government to temporarily [ban the broadcasting of international news outlets](#) in Israel if they are deemed a threat to national security, resulting in the [shuttering of Al Jazeera](#) within Israel. In May 2024, Israel temporarily [confiscated equipment from the Associated Press](#) for allegedly providing images to Al Jazeera. There are also ongoing [internet shutdowns](#) that prevent news and testimonies from Gaza from reaching the outside world, extensive allegations of [harassment and intimidation](#), and reports that more than [50 media offices have been destroyed or damaged](#) in Gaza.
- **Failure to investigate or hold perpetrators to account:** Despite repeated calls by civil society, none of these attacks, killings, or other allegations of abuse against journalists have been transparently or comprehensively investigated by the IDF. The IDF has a [longstanding pattern of impunity](#) that predates the current conflict: in May 2023, CPJ documented at least 20 journalists killed by the IDF over the past 22 years, including American-Palestinian journalist [Shireen Abu Akleh](#), and no one had ever been charged or held accountable for their deaths. The Israeli rights groups B'Tselem and Yesh Din have [independently](#) concluded that, when Israeli military's [investigations](#) do occur, they serve as a "[whitewash mechanism](#)," findings that are supported by other organizations such as [Human Rights Watch](#).

Journalists play an indispensable role in documenting and reporting on war crimes and human rights violations. The cumulative effect of Israel's abuses is to create the conditions for an information void for the public, including the American public, as well as for propaganda, and mis- and disinformation. While Israel contends that its actions are to keep its people safe, history shows that censorship and denial of the right to information is a flawed path to peace or security.

We, therefore, appeal to you to urge Prime Minister Netanyahu to ensure that the government of Israel:

Provides access and upholds the freedom to report

- Lifts its blockade on international, Israeli, and Palestinian journalists from independently accessing Gaza.
- Revokes legislation permitting the government to shut down foreign outlets, and refrains from any further legal or regulatory curtailment of media operations.
- Releases all Palestinian journalists from administrative detention or who are otherwise held without charge, including those forcibly disappeared.

Protects the lives of journalists

- Abjures the indiscriminate and deliberate killing of journalists.
- Guarantees the safety of all journalists, including allowing the delivery of newsgathering equipment and safety gear to reporters in Gaza and the West Bank.
- Allows all journalists seeking to evacuate from Gaza to do so.

Ensures accountability and ends impunity

- Transparently reforms its investigation procedures to ensure that all investigations into alleged war crimes, criminal conduct, or violations of human rights are swift, thorough, effective, transparent, independent, and in line with internationally accepted practices, such as the [Minnesota Protocol](#). Investigations into abuses against journalists must then be promptly conducted in accordance with these procedures.
- Allows international investigators and human rights organizations, including United Nations (UN) special rapporteurs and the UN [Independent International Commission of Inquiry](#) on the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel, unrestricted access to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory to investigate suspected violations of international law by all parties.

The United States must also adhere to its responsibility to investigate alleged war crimes committed by Israeli forces against its citizens, including [Dylan Collins and Shireen Abu-Akleh](#).

Senator McConnell and Speaker Johnson, we thank you for your attention to these important matters and look forward to seeing tangible actions from you advancing them.

Respectfully,

Amnesty International USA

Committee to Protect Journalists

Freedom of the Press Foundation

Knight First Amendment Institute

National Press Club

PEN America

Reporters Without Borders

The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy