

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 5, 2024

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
United States Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We appreciate your continued engagement with Congress as you work to resolve the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon and secure the release of all hostages. We write today to follow up on the December 2023 letter to President Biden about the lack of press freedom related to the conflicts. It is crucial for you to work with the Israeli and Egyptian governments to allow all interested journalists to report with appropriate protections and without restriction from Gaza.¹ We appreciate the State Department's response to the letter which reiterated the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment to protecting journalists during armed conflict. However, the situation on the ground in Gaza has gotten worse since last December. Crackdowns and violence against journalists in the West Bank have steadily increased as well.

We recognize the longstanding challenges to press freedom in Gaza predate Hamas's unspeakably brutal attacks on October 7, 2023. Hamas, a designated terrorist organization, has a record of harassing, obstructing, torturing, and using physical violence against journalists in Gaza.² Several journalists were among the 1,200 people killed on October 7th. We strongly condemn Hamas's actions, both in its repression of the Palestinian people and its violent attacks against the Israeli people. However, we must hold our closest democratic allies and partners to a higher standard than a terrorist organization when it comes to protecting the bedrock democratic value of freedom of the press.

Over one year into the war, the Israeli government continues to ban journalists from entering Gaza independently, despite standing calls from Israeli and foreign press in the country. With the exception of operational security requirements for embedded journalists, all interested journalists must be allowed to report without restriction from Gaza. As a Haaretz editorial asserts, "By blocking journalists from Gaza, Israel not only prevents coverage of the war's horrors but also hinders real-time scrutiny of Hamas' claims – a key Israeli interest."³ The Foreign Press Association in Israel calls "...for unfettered and independent access to Gaza. To Israel, we say

¹ https://www.schatz.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter_to_president_biden_on_press_freedom_in_gaza.pdf

² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/03/gaza-hamas-must-end-brutal-crackdown-against-protesters-and-rights-defenders/>

³ <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2024-09-11/ty-article-opinion/israel-must-allow-foreign-journalists-to-report-from-gaza/00000191-dd73-dd31-a9bd-ff779bf20000>

enough with the excuses. It is time to let us in.”⁴ We urge you to prioritize journalists’ immediate access to Gaza with guarantees from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to ensure that it does not target them in its operations.

Since October 7, 2023, over 130 journalists have been killed, the vast majority of whom were Palestinians killed in Gaza.^{5,6} The lack of safe working conditions for journalists in Gaza makes it almost impossible to have an accurate understanding of the humanitarian devastation taking place in the territory. Nevertheless, local reporters have continued working despite being displaced repeatedly, losing family members, experiencing hunger, and living under constant threat of violence. Israel has also injured scores of Palestinian journalists and detained dozens, some of whom have been placed in arbitrary administrative detention without access to due process.⁷

Journalists face safety threats from the IDF outside of Gaza as well. As you are aware, on October 13, 2023, IDF strikes hit a group of journalists in southern Lebanon. These strikes killed Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah, injured Agence France-Presse (AFP) journalist and U.S. citizen Dylan Collins, and caused severe injuries to another AFP journalist at the scene, Christina Assi, who lost her right leg.⁸ The journalists were wearing helmets and jackets clearly marked with the word “press” as they filmed from a location on top of an exposed hillside when they were struck by tank rounds. The IDF has not released a review or investigation into the incident.

Violence against journalists in the West Bank is on the rise as the IDF increases its operations. According to the United Nations (UN), there were at least three incidents in September 2024 alone where Israeli security forces fired live ammunition at journalists or their vehicles while they were reporting in the West Bank.⁹ Journalists are at risk of being detained and harassed, making it increasingly difficult to operate in the West Bank. On September 22, the IDF raided and closed Al Jazeera’s office in the West Bank for at least 45 days.¹⁰ This followed the IDF’s decision in May to close Al Jazeera’s offices in Israel.¹¹ The network remains banned and it is unclear what actions the U.S. government has taken on this issue beyond expressing concern.¹²

The United States must make clear to Israel that targeting media organizations and members of the press is unacceptable. It is also important that the United States support UN efforts calling for accountability and protection of journalists in Gaza and the West Bank. The absence of U.S.

⁴ <https://foreignpressassociation.online/2024/09/10/statement-by-the-board-of-the-foreign-press-association-the-fpa-demands-immediate-entrance-to-gaza-september-10-2024/>

⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/rate-journalists-are-being-killed-gaza-there-will-soon-be-no-one-left-keep-you-informed>

⁶ https://cpj.org/data/killed/all/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motiveUnconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker&cc_fips%5B%5D=IS&cc_fips%5B%5D=LE&start_year=2023&end_year=2024&group_by=year

⁷ <https://cpj.org/2024/10/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/>

⁸ <https://www.afp.com/en/inside-afp/journalists-killed-and-injured-lebanon-afps-investigation-points-israeli-army>

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/un-experts-urge-israel-stop-attacks-and-harassment-against-journalists#:~:text=Since%20October%202023%2C%20at%20least,to%20be%20under%20administrative%20detention.>

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-forces-raid-al-jazeera-bureau-west-bank-with-closure-order-2024-09-22/>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68961753>

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-concerned-after-israeli-raid-al-jazeera-operation-says-state-dept-2024-05-06/>

government support for accountability efforts by the UN and press freedom defenders only undermines U.S. leadership. Promoting press freedom globally, protecting journalist safety, and advancing international laws and norms are essential to sustaining a rules-based international order.

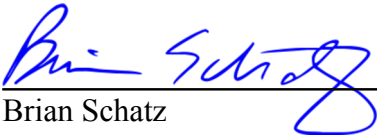
Considering our profound concern for the safety of journalists and demand for justice for targeted attacks on journalists, we respectfully request detailed responses to the following questions:

1. What specific steps has the State Department taken to secure access for international journalists, including Americans, to Gaza?
 - a. Has the State Department urged Israel to permit entry to journalists willing to travel to Gaza for reporting? If so, in what ways, by whom, and how often?
 - b. Has the State Department expressed support for Israeli journalists and international correspondents in Israel seeking to gain independent access to Gaza? If so, in what ways, by whom, and how often?
 - c. Has the State Department advocated for equipment for journalists, including cell phones and cameras, to be allowed into Gaza?
2. What steps has the State Department taken to ensure that the IDF – a major recipient of U.S. security assistance – reforms its rules of engagement (ROEs) to mitigate harm to journalists in Gaza and the West Bank?
 - a. If the IDF is unwilling to change ROEs in ways that lessen harm to journalists, what steps are you considering taking to show U.S. government disapproval and secure policy changes that end the pattern of violent attacks on journalists?
 - b. Is it your assessment that the Israeli government has thoroughly investigated allegations of any wrongdoing, ensuring immediate and transparent accountability for any abuses?
 - c. Is it your assessment that Israeli government's actions in Gaza are in accordance with international humanitarian law?
 - d. What support has the State Department provided to help injured journalists leave Gaza for medical care?
3. What steps have you taken to seek full accountability for the killings of journalists by the IDF?
 - a. What steps have you taken to ensure accountability for the October 13, 2023 attack that injured Mr. Collins and killed Issam Abdallah in southern Lebanon?
 - b. Do you have information about the status of the reported Israeli investigation into the incident?
 - c. Do you have confidence that any Israeli investigation would result in effective accountability and serve to deter future IDF attacks on journalists?
4. What specific steps has the State Department taken to secure the release of journalists in administrative detention?
 - a. Has the U.S. Embassy assessed allegations of mistreatment in Israeli custody of journalists?
 - b. Have you discussed allegations of mistreatment of detained journalists with Israeli authorities, including IDF leaders?

- c. What steps have you taken to identify the whereabouts of missing Palestinian journalists? Have you asked the Israeli government if missing journalists are in their custody?
 - d. Is it your assessment that the Israeli government has thoroughly investigated allegations of any wrongdoing, ensuring immediate and transparent accountability for any abuses or violations related to detentions?
 5. What steps has the State Department taken to advocate the importance of press freedom within Israel?
 - a. Have you or other State Department officials raised your concern over the closing of Al Jazeera in Israel and the West Bank to the Israeli government? If so, what responses have you received?
 6. What is the State Department assessment of the impact on global press freedom of countries – especially closely allied democracies, like Israel – of placing restrictions on, detaining, or allowing violence against journalists?

We appreciate your response to these questions and look forward to hearing from you.

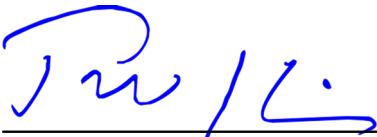
Respectfully,



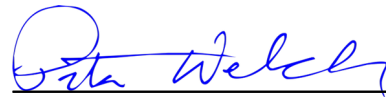
Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator




Bernard Sanders
United States Senator




Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



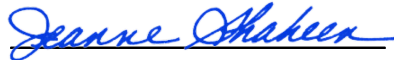
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United States Senator




George S. Helmy
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator