

# Don't shoot the messenger: The role of journalists in Gaza's health sector

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Since the beginning of the current Gaza-Israel conflict in October 2023, over 62 000 Palestinians have been killed, including over 10 000 children, and more than 100 000 have been injured (1). Among those killed are over 200 journalists who were actively reporting the war (2,3). The number of journalists killed daily in Gaza far exceeds the figures from other conflicts across the globe (4). Journalism is very important in warfare settings as journalists record and document the attacks, and it is incumbent on the warring parties and the international community to ensure the protection of journalists who are civilians. Article 79 of Additional Protocol I of the 1977 Geneva Conventions stipulates the protections of journalists as follows: "Journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians within the meaning of Article 50, paragraph 1." (5). Therefore, targeting journalists during a war means targeting civilians and it is a breach of the Geneva Convention.

Journalists have played a pivotal role in reporting the assault on Gaza's health sector and the destruction of dozens of health facilities. As of the time of writing this paper, more than 1000 health workers in Gaza had been killed and over 300 medical personnel had been arrested (6). Countless instances of abuse and public humiliation of doctors, nurses and other health workers have been reported (7). Many of the journalists providing daily reports of the attacks on Gaza have been displaced to local hospitals, where it is easier to access a power source (8).

The war on Gaza has seen an unprecedented display of violence against healthcare (9). In November 2023, Human Rights Watch documented Israeli airstrikes on Al-Nasr Hospital in Gaza City, which cut off the oxygen supply for babies in the neonatal intensive care unit. Nearly 3 weeks later, when physicians returned to the hospital they found 4 babies dead in their incubators (10).

One year after the onset of the war in Gaza, 138 journalists had been killed; 15 were killed in Gaza City, where the largest population of Palestinians lived before the current escalations, and 12 in Khan Younis, located in South Gaza. We illustrate this with the story

of Wael Al-Dahdouh, who served as Al Jazeera bureau chief in Gaza.

Wael became the face of Al-Jazeera's reporting at the height of the war, and was regarded as a hero for continuing to report the war even after the death of his entire family, including his wife and children. His eldest son, Hamza Al-Dahdouh, was also a journalist with Al-Jazeera and was killed with his colleague, Mustafa Thuraya, on 7 January 2024, by an airstrike, while driving to a reporting assignment in southern Gaza (11). Although their story is not unique, because there have been numerous similar instances in the Gaza Strip during the past year, it is important to note the impact of the large-scale media networks reporting the Gaza war. We must appreciate the role of social media and freelance journalists who are telling the Palestinian story. Many of these media organizations have transited from traditional television, radio and newspaper channels to social networking platforms and this has helped improve the interactive nature of the news and provided opportunity for audiences to openly express their views in response (10).

Social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok have provided a platform for independent freelancers to document their subhuman day-to-day living conditions. Through the freelancers we are able to obtain information about incidents in real-time, such as the overnight flour massacre, where at least 112 Palestinians were killed by an Israeli attack while seeking relief materials delivered by countries through several partners (12). On 14 October 2024, a similar incident was broadcast globally as Palestinians used social media to report a major Israeli attack on Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which resulted in the death of 4 people and injured dozens amid a large fire (13).

Internet restrictions have severely limited the ability of Palestinians to document their experiences. We therefore must ensure that journalists have the ability to document and publicize the incidents as they unfold. As journalists continue to report the atrocities committed on Gaza's most vulnerable populations, we call on the global medical community and political leaders to help

broker peace and secure a permanent end to the ongoing aggression. Just as healthcare workers have the right and obligation to provide care to the sick, journalists have the right to report the daily occurrences. Ultimately, healthcare workers depend on journalists to report the tragedies they witness in the emergency room daily.

We must uphold and protect their right to freedom of reporting without fear of arrest, persecution or death.

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