



JOURNALISTS IN THE LINE OF FIRE LESSONS FROM THE 2024 WAR IN LEBANON

White Paper on Journalists' Safety

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Author
Karim Safieddine



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between September and November 2024, Lebanon experienced one of the most violent chapters in its recent history during the war between Israel and Hezbollah. This period coincided with deepening sectarian divides, a surge in hate speech and disinformation, and intensifying instability across Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

Journalists and media workers found themselves performing two impossible tasks: (1) delivering facts from the ground in real time, and (2) trying to remain safe – or at least alive – while doing so. At least 13 journalists and media workers were killed under Israeli fire in Lebanon alone; dozens more were displaced, injured, or suffered devastating material losses.

Journalists in the region are targeted both by Israeli military strikes and by local despots and factions determined to silence independent voices. This white paper examines four main shortcomings in the emergency response to journalistic safety during the war and offers a set of lessons and policy recommendations directed at donors, international agencies, public authorities, and media institutions.

Key findings:

- Emergency responses have been largely reactive, with little institutional capacity for prevention.
- Journalists and media workers have very limited resources and legal protections to secure their physical, medical, and socio-economic well-being.
- Local media outlets face severe financial precarity; as a result, safety costs are often deprioritized. Non-profit organizations and CSOs, meanwhile, are vulnerable to funding cuts driven by political shifts in donor countries.
- Perpetrators of attacks against journalists continue to benefit from entrenched culture and structure of impunity.

Accordingly, this white paper calls for:

- Governments and international institutions to apply pressure – including sanctions where appropriate – to end impunity for violence against journalists.
- International organizations and donors to institutionalize safety as a standing budget line in media support: covering PPE, counseling, legal insurance, and emergency relocation. Investments should also prioritize the development of a cadre of local trainers and the integration of safety into journalism curricula.



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- Media outlets to strengthen the legal and socio-economic rights of media workers through fairer contracts, enforceable safety clauses, and clear insurance and compensation provisions.
- Tech platforms to improve Arabic-language accessibility, refine algorithmic moderation, and align content policies with international human rights standards.
- The Lebanese government to move beyond symbolic statements and adopt proactive measures to protect journalists and guarantee free expression.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Lebanon has witnessed a gradual expansion of civic space, particularly following the 2005 withdrawal of the Syrian army. This shift enabled civil society organizations (CSOs) to operate more freely in the fields of media development, freedom of expression, and journalist safety. With the support of international partners, a number of initiatives emerged to promote safety norms and practical protocols, which are now considered essential for protecting journalists and enabling meaningful coverage during conflict.

Yet Lebanon's track record on journalist protection remains troubling. Since independence in 1943, more than 25 media professionals have been assassinated, often with complete impunity. The 2024 war between Hezbollah and Israel revealed how the erosion of moral and legal norms, exemplified by the atrocities in Gaza and the broader collapse of international accountability, has reshaped the risks facing journalists. New threats are also emerging from the unchecked spread of artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance technologies, increasingly deployed by governments and digital platforms without transparency or safeguards.

The September–November 2024 war laid bare these structural weaknesses. At least 13 journalists were killed in Israeli airstrikes and shellings; many more were displaced or injured. Several incidents of intimidation and obstruction were reported against those covering the conflict, whether from Israeli forces or Hezbollah militants in areas controlled by the latter.

Domestically, Lebanon's political fragmentation is reflected in a deeply polarized media landscape, where ownership is often concentrated in the hands of powerful political actors. Therefore, the space for public discourse shrank further, with increasing restrictions on reporting and growing threats to digital freedoms.

In this context, reassessing the safety of journalists, both physical and digital, is an urgent priority. This white paper seeks to analyze the evolving risks facing media professionals in Lebanon and draw actionable lessons from the 2024 war. It explores three central questions:

- What are the most pressing dangers confronting journalists today?
- What safety mechanisms exist, and are they adequate?
- How can protective responses be improved through local ownership and international support?

Lebanon represents a dynamic and instructive case. The challenges faced by its journalists mirror those in many countries grappling with state dysfunction, ethno-sectarian divisions, and regional instability. What happens here carries lessons for the broader Levant and beyond.

This white paper aims to offer urgent, policy-oriented and programmatic recommendations based on the perspectives of journalists, media institutions, and local civil society actors. It is intended for:

- International donors supporting media and humanitarian responses;
- Lebanese government institutions;
- Media outlets employing journalists in conflict settings;
- Press freedom and journalism support organizations, both local and international;
- Technology companies and digital platforms whose systems directly impact journalist safety.

Through this effort, we hope to strengthen the protection of journalists and reinforce the resilience of the information ecosystem in times of war.



CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Understanding the vulnerabilities faced by journalists during the 2024 Hezbollah-Israel war requires situating Lebanon's media sector within the broader context of the country's prolonged political, economic, and institutional collapse, significantly deepened in the aftermath of October 7, 2023.

The war, which escalated on September 17 and lasted until November 28, 2024, displaced more than 1.2 million people, caused an estimated \$13 billion in damage, and devastated various regions, including the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and South Lebanon. According to the Independent Taskforce for Lebanon, over 1,900 hectares of farmland were destroyed. These impacts further strained an already fragile landscape shaped by the 2019 economic crisis and the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion in August 2020.

Journalists have felt the consequences not only in terms of their physical security, but also in their economic stability, legal protection, and ability to function within increasingly restrictive conditions.

JOURNALISTS IN THE CROSSFIRE

Media workers were among those most directly affected by the violence. According to a report by Widad Jarboun, Senior Researcher at the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF):

- At least 13 journalists were killed by Israeli fire;
- More than 150 journalists were forcibly displaced;
- Multiple media offices and facilities were targeted and destroyed.

Pressure came not only from foreign military aggression but also from local political forces attempting to control narratives and restrict critical coverage. Journalists reporting from the southern suburbs and South Lebanon were frequently harassed and obstructed by Hezbollah militants.

Meanwhile, the information space itself became a battleground. A report by SMEX, released on October 17, 2024, documented widespread disinformation campaigns, targeted digital advertisements, and bot activity originating from Israeli sources. These tactics aimed to distort public perception and intimidate both journalists and citizens. Further reporting by SMEX and SKF pointed to growing fears of digital surveillance, cyberattacks, and coordinated smear campaigns, particularly targeting journalists who publicly criticized Israeli military operations or Hezbollah's involvement in the war.

On social media, many reported cases of content suppression and shadowbanning, raising serious concerns about freedom of expression online during wartime.

A FRAGILE OPENING FOR REFORM?

Despite the ongoing security threats, Lebanon has experienced a tentative political opening in the past nine months. In parallel to Hezbollah's weakening, the election of President Joseph Aoun, a former commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, and the appointment of Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, a former judge at the International Court of Justice, were accompanied by renewed public commitments to constitutional freedoms, accountability, and the protection of civil liberties. Regionally, the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, long seen as a destabilizing influence, has further reduced the risk of cross-border spillover and opened the door to potential re-balancing of the two countries' ties.

However, this top-down momentum has not yet translated into structural reforms or tangible guarantees for journalist protection. In practice, journalists continue to be summoned, face interrogation, legal threats and surveillance, often under the pretext of cybercrime or defamation. The Anti-Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau, operating under the Internal Security Forces (ISF), remains a powerful instrument used by entrenched political and financial elites to suppress dissent.

This stands in clear violation of Lebanese law, which stipulates that cases involving journalists should be handled by the Publications Court, not by criminal courts or security agencies. The continued abuse of legal procedures to intimidate journalists reflects deeper weaknesses in Lebanon's rule-of-law architecture and its ability to protect independent media in times of crisis.

As SKF Executive Director Ayman Mhanna noted in response to the government's handling of journalists' killings and violations of freedom of expression: *"No concrete actions beyond broad oral announcements."*

The gap between official rhetoric and institutional practice underscores the urgent need for a coordinated, enforceable framework to protect journalists, particularly as the threat of renewed conflict looms.

METHODOLOGY

This white paper is based on a multi-method qualitative research approach, grounded in long-standing relationships with key stakeholders across Lebanon's media sector. These include media executives, frontline journalists, CSOs, donors, and public officials.

Primary Data Collection

The findings are drawn from four focus group discussions, each organized around a distinct stakeholder category. These were complemented by informal but carefully documented interviews with security and media officials. The focus group discussions explored:

- Experiences with safety procedures currently in place;
- Access to and impact of existing training and support programs;
- Perceptions of institutional responsibility and accountability;
- Priorities and suggestions for improving protection mechanisms.

Secondary Research

In parallel, we conducted desk research to map the broader media safety ecosystem. This included:

- A review of existing safety protocols and support systems, both local and international;
- Documentation of violations committed against journalists during the 2024 war;
- Comparative insights from other high-risk media environments in the Levant.

Together, these methods provide a rich foundation for the analysis and recommendations developed in this white paper.¹

¹ A detailed methodological note, including research tools and interview frameworks, is available in the annex.

MAIN RESULTS: A LIMITED RESPONSE ECOSYSTEM

NATURE OF SUPPORT PROGRAMS IN LEBANON: PREVENTION AND CROSS-SECTORAL COOPERATION

Following the escalation of hostilities in September 2024, five primary organizations coordinated efforts related to journalistic safety, emergency response, and relocation: SKF, the Alternative Media Syndicate (now known as the Union of Journalists in Lebanon), Maharat Foundation, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and Reporters Without Borders (RSF). According to interviewees, key priorities included relocation assistance (with SKF providing \$700 per journalist for rent expenses), psychosocial support (primarily after the war, in December), provision of vests and helmets, and Wi-Fi connectivity through mobile routers.

In October 2024, CPJ provided a \$40,000 grant to SKF's Emergency Journalist Assistance Fund (EJAF), which eventually reached a total of \$280,000, with additional contributions from the French Development Agency, CFI, the Norwegian Embassy, International Media Support, the National Endowment for Democracy, UNESCO, and private individuals. SKF worked with the Alternative Media Syndicate to identify journalists displaced by Israeli bombardment in heavily targeted areas. Through this program alone, at least 90 journalists received emergency housing, and more than 100 were provided, free of charge, with personal protective equipment (PPE) for a limited period.

SKF's coordinators and their colleagues from peer organizations had to act with extreme urgency, disbursing funds via cash transfer companies and physically delivering equipment to avoid burdening journalists with transportation. To vet recipients, local rights-based organizations relied on syndicate databases and peer recommendation to ensure fairness and transparency in distribution. Lebanese state institutions, by contrast, were reportedly absent from this process, leaving an already difficult task almost entirely to social workers and non-profit staff.

Prior to the September 2024 escalation, a wide range of initiatives had been launched in Lebanon to improve journalist safety amid rising regional tensions. In response to increasing hostilities in 2023 and early 2024, SKF delivered an advanced Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT) program tailored not only for field reporters but also for editors and desk managers coordinating coverage in bombed areas. More than 190 local and international journalists have participated in these trainings over the past three years.

Crucially, these efforts were not limited to short-term crisis response. Since 2022, SKF had been working in long-term partnership with the ACOS Alliance, Rory Peck Trust, Maharat Foundation, the Marie Colvin Journalists' Network (MCJN), and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) to deliver a series of five-day safety courses in Lebanon. These trainings covered lifesaving medical techniques, trauma resilience, and digital risk mitigation.

During the most recent war, the International Journalists' Network (IJNet) published, in November 2024, a widely circulated safety guidance package for journalists covering the Israel-Hezbollah conflict. Developed in consultation with Lebanese press groups, it included best practices for assembling emergency backpacks, using digital protection tools, responding to gunfire, fact-checking in crisis settings, and maintaining mental health. It also included guidance on accessing emergency housing and psychosocial listening sessions, offered by partner organizations.

Parallel efforts – though more limited in scale – emerged in universities, research-focused CSOs, and journalism training centers. In July 2024, Beirut Arab University (BAU), in coordination with the Lebanese Army, conducted a security training course for journalists and media professionals working in dangerous zones. In Fall 2023, the Lebanese American University (LAU), with SKF support, introduced a for-credit course titled “Journalism Safety,” based on a curriculum developed by the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation and adapted for the MENA region by SKF. The Al Jazeera Media Institute, through its Media for Development initiative, organized a specialized training in Beirut from September 30 to October 2, 2023. The training focused on journalism within the framework of international law and humanitarian legislation and included sessions to enhance journalists' legal awareness regarding their rights and protections during wartime reporting. Maharat Foundation, through its 2023 research project “Holistic Safety for Women Journalists,” explored patterns of harassment and abuse targeting female reporters in Lebanon and emphasized the need for stronger institutional safeguards.

Despite this broad range of pre-existing initiatives, resources during the war remained limited. The crisis underscored the need for greater international and governmental support to ensure journalists are adequately trained, safely relocated when necessary, and consistently equipped with protective gear. This need is further exacerbated by an emerging trend: the reduction of donor funding for social justice, safety, and media freedom and development programs, including those focused on countering disinformation and hate speech. With many leading donor countries shifting their foreign policy priorities, this poses a serious risk to the fragile ecosystem supporting both digital and on-ground safety for journalists in Lebanon.

LOCAL SAFETY PROTOCOLS: LIMITED PREPAREDNESS AND LEGAL GUARANTEES

It is essential to distinguish between the safety considerations of television channels and those of online and print outlets. Television stations rely heavily on field reporting, which requires journalists

to be physically present in conflict zones. However, online outlets in Lebanon have also incorporated field coverage into their employment structures and editorial workflows. Across all formats, editors and employers participating in the focus groups consistently expressed a strong commitment to protecting their journalists during wartime, often going to considerable lengths to do so (as further detailed below).

Safety Training and Equipment: Modest Resources and Institutional Weakness

A representative of the Alternative Media Syndicate, which was tasked with distributing safety kits and press vests during the war, emphasized the speed and responsiveness of their actions in addressing journalists' immediate needs. However, several editors highlighted a persistent gap in the provision of both digital and physical safety training, especially among smaller, underfunded outlets, or larger institutions that lack internal interest in safety standards.

One editor specifically denounced the paralysis and ineffectiveness of the Press Order of Lebanon and the Syndicate of Lebanese Press Editors in supporting journalists' safety or advocating on their behalf with national or international institutions. In parallel, the Najib Mikati government, in place during the war, failed to initiate a serious investigation into the killing of Reuters photojournalist Issam Abdallah in October 2023. In such a context, media outlets are left to rely almost entirely on their own institutional resources, which are unevenly distributed and rarely supported by a conducive policy or legal environment.

Can Media Employers Take Initiative?

The role of media employers goes beyond immediate logistical capacity. It also includes the willingness to treat safety as a core element of journalistic integrity and institutional credibility. A representative from Legal Agenda urged all journalists to have their contracts reviewed and negotiated with guidance from legal professionals, especially during times of conflict, to ensure that safety and liability protections are in place. While better-resourced media organizations have offered basic safety guarantees, freelance journalists – who constitute a large portion of those covering the war on the ground – continue to face serious gaps in protection due to a lack of structural support.

One editor remarked that certain outlets have gained notoriety for placing their journalists in dangerous situations and subsequently using the resulting violations for publicity purposes. This troubling dynamic, often based on implicit coercion, has led many correspondents to call for expanded psychosocial support. However, existing services remain limited in both scope and quality.

Despite these challenges, some editors and media managers reported that journalists involved in physical or digital risk-taking have received relevant safety training. They cited local programs led by SKF, SMEX, and Maharat Foundation, with particular emphasis on SKF's HEFAT sessions. Editors

also highlighted the value of regional training events that bring together journalists from across the Middle East, often held in hubs like Istanbul.

When it comes to field reporting, several independent, digital-native media outlets stated that they do not allow their journalists to enter conflict zones without prior approval, proper coordination, and protection from entities such as the Lebanese Armed Forces or UNIFIL, particularly in areas known for civil unrest or active combat. Some outlets avoid field coverage altogether in such situations. Editors also prioritize assigning coverage to journalists who are familiar with the geographic area (for example, correspondents residing in Dahyeh are preferred for reporting from that neighborhood). Certain outlets, especially those with external funding, offer full medical coverage and insurance, and some have developed contingency relocation plans in case of further escalation.

On the digital front, several outlets require their staff to complete digital safety training, especially those with a public-facing role. These trainings focus on mitigating threats such as hacking, phishing, and surveillance. However, the implementation of digital safety measures often depends on the initiative and follow-up of individual journalists. Practices like two-factor authentication (2FA), strong password management, and the use of authentication apps are promoted, but journalists, who often already operate in a precarious job market, are often left to bear the responsibility for their own cybersecurity without institutional reinforcement.

COMPENSATION, PSYCHOSOCIAL AND MEDICAL CARE

Contrary to the accounts shared by media employers and executives, field reporters – particularly correspondents working for major television networks – repeatedly stated that journalist safety does not appear to be a real priority for upper management. While editors may occasionally instruct reporters to leave a location when danger becomes imminent, the overwhelming focus remains on securing footage, breaking stories, and maximizing audience engagement.

Focus group participants went further, suggesting that many executives treat safety as a secondary concern; an unwelcome cost rather than an institutional responsibility. Much of the protective equipment available is outdated; vehicles frequently break down over long distances; and safety training, whether digital or on-ground, is rarely treated by management as a core requirement. In sharp contrast to journalists working for regional or international outlets based in Lebanon, those employed by local companies reportedly did not receive bonuses or additional compensation for high-risk reporting, as was previously offered during the COVID-19 pandemic or more recent conflicts.

Nearly all participants in the focus groups had attended various training sessions, with particular emphasis on HEFAT. However, they noted a significant gap in access: not all team members – especially videographers and technical staff responsible for equipment – were given the opportunity to participate in these essential safety programs. Participants underscored the need to scale up and institutionalize programmatic initiatives led by CSOs such as SKF, Maharat Foundation, and SMEX.

GAPS AS ARTICULATED BY DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders	Identified gaps
Media outlets	- Insufficient financial and material resources to replace outdated or damaged safety equipment. - Lack of sustained international pressure to ensure accountability and end impunity for attacks on journalists. - Need for well-resourced and specialized expertise to deliver safety training sessions in a regular and systematic manner.
Journalists	- Absence of effective international mechanisms to prevent impunity for those committing war crimes against journalists. - Inadequate legal protections for socio-economic and medical rights, especially for freelancers and those working without contracts. - Need for stronger advocacy by rights-based organizations and syndicates, alongside robust negotiations for fairer pay and safer working conditions.
Non-profits	- Limited resources to deliver continuous and comprehensive safety training programs. - Insufficient funding for emergency housing (rent, furniture, utilities) and replacement of essential equipment during periods of sudden escalation or displacement. - Shrinking political support in donor countries, particularly with the rise of populist governments that deprioritize social justice and journalist safety in foreign assistance programs.



COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS: LEBANON VERSUS PALESTINE AND SYRIA

	Lebanon	Syria	Palestine
Legal and political context	Lebanon’s relatively de-veloped legal and political structure stands in contrast to the more authoritari-an contexts of Syria and Palestine. Although its sectarian power-sharing system has long contribut-ed to institutional paralysis and hindered key reforms, these same contradictions have, at times, created space for a freer press. The Lebanese media landscape has also been shaped by major developments over the past six years: a deep-ening economic collapse, the 2019 popular uprising, the August 4, 2020 Beirut port explosion, and, more recently, the war between Hezbollah and Israel. These overlapping crises have intensified the challenges facing journalists, while also highlighting the vital role of independent media.	The fall of Bashar Assad’s regime in December 2024 marked a turning point in Syria’s recent history, opening a period of cau-tious optimism around free speech, press freedom, and public assembly. A relative pause in armed conflict since 2011 allowed several exiled media outlets to re-establish operations inside the country. The As-sad regime had long been known for arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, making even the basic exercise of journalism an act of defi-ance. While the post-Assad transi-tion initially offered signs of reform, significant chal-lenges persist. Chief among them are: (1) the threat of retributive measures against pro-Assad or criti-cal journalists; (2) a political environment still dominated by armed militias rather than the rule of law; and (3) the absence of strong legal protections and the broad-er constraints of a fragile economy, which together undermine prospects for a sustainable, independent media sector. Recent violent events in Suwaida exposed these fragilities, from the killing of media coordinators amid clashes between local Druze forces and the cen-tral government, to restric-tions on journalistic access to the region.	Palestine is currently the most dangerous place in the world for journal-ists. In Gaza alone, over 250 journalists and media workers have been killed since the start of the Israeli war in October 2023. Jour-nalists continue to report in conditions of extreme precarity, lacking access to food, clean water, shelter, electricity, or even minimal physical safety. Many face the constant threat of anni-hilation. In the West Bank, journal-istic safety has also sharply deteriorated, largely due to increasing settler violence and widespread repres-sion. Media outlets across the political spectrum have been subject to censorship, shutdowns, and physical attacks. Media crews were trapped by settler road-blocks, while the Palestinian Authority forcibly closed Al Jazeera’s offices. The rapid erosion of the social and economic fabric in both the West Bank and Gaza has pushed indepen-dent media to the margins, with most journalists now relying almost exclusively on social media to document unfolding events in highly dangerous and traumatic environments.

	Lebanon	Syria	Palestine
Violations	• Since October 7, 2023 (as of September 2025): 13+ journalists and photojournalists killed • For year 2025 (as of September 2025): 105 recorded violations targeting journalists	• For year 2025 (As of September 2025): 32 recorded violations targeting journalists	• Since October 7, 2023 (As of September 2025): 250+ journalists and photojournalists killed in Gaza • For year 2025 (As of September 2025): 81 killed and 537 recorded violations targeting journalists
Media support and emergency response ecosystem	While Lebanon's official Press Order and Editors' Syndicate maintain historic institutional standing, their capacity to defend journalists' rights and safety has been severely eroded by sectarian politics and structural dysfunction. In this vacuum, the burden of support has shifted to rights-based CSOs such as SKF, Maharat Foundation, SMEX, and the Alternative Media Syndicate. The country's journalist safety ecosystem now depends largely on the strength and continuity of this local CSO sector. These organizations have developed protective programs, distributed safety equipment, and delivered emergency support, often with input from international donors and partners. Still, the response remains highly decentralized, and progress is largely driven by the initiative and credibility these groups have built over the past two decades.	Since the 2011 revolution, Syrian journalists have faced acute risks. This triggered a broad response by local and international civil society actors, who began delivering emergency assistance, protective equipment, and training to frontline journalists, especially in digital safety and disinformation resilience. Key actors included, among others, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), <u>Syrian Journalists' Association (SJA)</u>, <u>Syria Direct</u>, <u>Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN)</u>, <u>Reporters Without Borders (RSF)</u>, <u>Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ)</u>, <u>Al Jazeera Media Institute</u>, <u>DW Akademie</u>, <u>CPJ</u>, <u>Free Press Unlimited</u>, and <u>International Media Support</u>. By 2021, Syria had become the top recipient of RSF's assistance program, which had supported over 250 journalists and 26 media outlets. Still, the enduring presence of militia rule has frequently blocked journalists from operating safely and has often prevented the delivery of protective gear and support to areas under siege or active conflict.	As in Lebanon, Palestine's formal representative institutions, such as the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate, remain heavily shaped by political factionalism, limiting their capacity to respond to the needs of journalists. CSOs have stepped in to fill this void. Among the most active is the <u>Mada Center</u>, which regularly monitors violations across Gaza, the West Bank, and the Palestinian territories inside Israel. Other organizations such as Al-Haq, the Mezan Center for Human Rights, and Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor also document violations, though their focus is more broadly on civil and political rights rather than press freedom specifically. In Gaza, access to protective gear and emergency support relies heavily on the efforts of international and regional actors such as ARIJ, <u>Free Press Unlimited</u> (via Reporters Respond), and Press House, working alongside local media organizations. However, multiple reports indicate that Israeli authorities have <u>obstructed</u> the delivery of protective material into Gaza, despite international efforts. The deliberate targeting of journalists wearing press vests, coupled with the unprecedented scale of media worker casualties, underscores the urgent need for accountability and a shift in focus, from merely providing technical safety support to demanding an end to impunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS, JOURNALISTS, AND MEDIA-RELATED CSOs: UPHOLDING THE RIGHTS OF MEDIA WORKERS

Nearly all participants emphasized the urgent need to establish crisis response systems *before* an escalation occurs. Lebanon remains stuck in a pattern of reacting to crises rather than preparing for them in advance. While this primarily stems from the state's failure to prioritize journalist protection, owing to chronic institutional paralysis, cronyism, and intra-elite conflict, it is all the more necessary to empower alternative mechanisms in the meantime.

Digital Safety Infrastructure

Media organizations and journalists must proactively develop a more robust and sophisticated response to digital threats. As outlined in a 2022 [report](#) by SKF, an effective digital safety strategy should rest on three pillars: policies, technical systems, and training.

- *Policies* should include regular data backups, identification of sensitive data, strict password protocols, and enforced two-factor authentication for key accounts.
- *Technical measures* include the use of licensed software, the replacement of discontinued programs, and secure internet connections.
- *Training*, particularly on digital safety best practices, should be scaled up and expanded, building on initiatives already led by groups like SMEX.

Strengthening Local Support Systems

Alternative syndicates, local press clubs, and media-focused non-profits should be at the center of building an in-house, resilient social support ecosystem. This shift away from exclusive reliance on external support can lay the groundwork for long-term sustainability.

Enhancing the legal and organizational capacity of the Alternative Media Syndicate (*aka* the Union of Journalists in Lebanon), in coordination with rights-based organizations focused on press freedom and socio-economic rights, can help secure stronger protections for journalists, particularly freelancers and precariously employed workers. These protections are especially critical for employees of large television networks, many of whom have seen safety budgets slashed as part of broader cost-

cutting measures. Safety protocols, such as access to protective equipment, transportation stipends, relocation allowances, and emergency evacuation costs, are often the first to be sacrificed.

The Resource Gap

From the perspective of media outlets, the issue is often one of resources. One outlet that maintains a relatively stable business model reported spending at least USD 100,000 annually on safety measures, particularly while covering high-risk zones near the Syrian border. This underscores the need for deeper engagement with donors, international institutions, and supportive governments to expand the financial and technical support available to local media institutions that are refining their security and protection strategies.

FOR GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: CONFRONTING IMPUNITY FOR THE KILLING OF JOURNALISTS

Several interviewees, particularly from legal non-profits and digital-native media outlets, stressed the need to go beyond material support. Lebanon's position in the region requires stronger backing for legal monitoring and the documentation of violations committed against journalists. After the killing of more than a dozen media workers in Lebanon during the most recent war, the international community cannot remain passive. It must support legal strategies aimed at accountability. This includes legal, advocacy, and logistical support for those pursuing strategic litigation before international courts.

Building a broad international consensus, with leadership and investment from institutions such as the UN, CPJ, and RSF, could generate pressure on the Lebanese state to prioritize a clear legal roadmap, one that enforces protection treaties and leverages its diplomatic channels in this direction. The Lebanese government, now facing opportunities for institutional reform, must shift from being a passive observer to a proactive actor. State officials, particularly within the Ministry of Information and other regulatory bodies, should coordinate more closely with CSOs and media-support organizations. Given the recurrent risks of conflict and Israeli military operations in South Lebanon and the Bekaa, security agencies should play an active role in coordinating journalists' access to conflict zones, including the development of geographical risk maps. The state must also mobilize its international networks to facilitate the provision of equipment and safety training in anticipation of future escalations.

Sustainable improvements in journalists' legal and social protections, including their economic rights and freedom of expression, ultimately depend on legislative reform. A new media law must mark a clean break from past practices. In recent years, administrative decisions and bureaucratic procedures have not only obstructed journalists' work but also expanded the reach of security and intelligence agencies into the online sphere. Such measures undermine press freedom and further weaken the capacity of independent media to investigate and operate effectively.



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FOR DONORS: SUPPORTING LOCAL ACTORS AND REFINING STRATEGY

While the digital and field safety training sessions offered by SKF, SMEX, and other institutions have proven vital for at-risk journalists, participants consistently pointed to a severe lack of resources. Donors and INGOs should therefore require the establishment of a dedicated safety budget for any media outlet receiving support. This budget would cover PPE, psychosocial counseling, legal insurance, and emergency relocation.

Funding should also be directed toward strengthening and expanding existing safety hubs in Lebanon, ensuring that they can operate across multiple cities and regions. Safe houses and emergency programs must not only offer protection in the field or online, but also provide psychosocial care and, in some cases, economic opportunities for displaced or dissident journalists.

Beyond direct support, donors can play a strategic role by helping media institutions and non-profits strengthen their business models. Lebanon's media sector faces major challenges of weak institutionalization, financial dependency, and limited sustainability. There is also a widespread lack of knowledge about cost-effective and efficient safety models suitable for conflict zones – a gap that donors could help bridge through targeted technical assistance to media executives.

As part of our research, SKF interviewed Victor Khoury, a specialist in journalist training, security, and risk assessment. He underscored two priorities:

1. Training trainers, to ensure each country has its own safety focal points, reducing reliance on international experts.
2. Contextualizing global HEFAT programs, adapting them to local realities and integrating them into university curricula for journalism and media students.

These approaches would create a multiplier effect, embedding safety as a long-term capacity rather than a short-term intervention.

FOR TECH PLATFORMS: DIGITAL SAFETY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Social media platforms are today the primary regulators of hate speech and harassment worldwide. The internal policies of Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok therefore play a decisive role in shaping the digital safety and security of journalists. As numerous SKF [reports](#) have documented, Lebanon has seen repeated waves of online attacks against independent and dissident journalists.

A joint [report](#) by SKF, Media Diversity Institute (MDI), and Ranking Digital Rights (RDR) assessed the regulatory frameworks of these major platforms. Several key shortcomings were identified:

1. Language barriers and inconsistencies, particularly in translations between English and Arabic in privacy documents, Terms of Service (X), and intellectual property policies (TikTok).
2. Weak reference to human rights standards; TikTok, for instance, does not explicitly anchor its moderation policies in international human rights frameworks. Under Elon Musk's leadership, X has allowed greater tolerance for hate speech directed at human rights defenders and journalists.
3. Lack of Arabic-language assessments; there is no evidence that the platforms have carried out human rights impact assessments in Arabic, despite the fact that most journalists in the region communicate in Arabic and its various dialects. This omission limits their ability to address local risks effectively.

What Can Be Done?

A recent [study](#) by Stockmann et al. (2023) concluded that social media platforms must reorient their role toward advancing the public interest. This means moving away from a model driven solely by private enterprise and instead adopting principles of public accountability and transparency. Achieving this requires greater clarity and responsibility in how platforms design, implement, and evaluate their content moderation and complaint mechanisms.

Despite official claims of alignment with human rights standards, the current trajectory of platform governance suggests otherwise. In practice, influential voices within the industry have redefined “free speech” in ways that allow hate speech and harassment to flourish. This approach stands in direct contradiction to UNESCO’s recommendations and internationally recognized human rights norms.

Addressing these gaps requires:

1. Investing in research to optimize complaints and reporting mechanisms and to ensure that content moderation strategies prioritize user safety as much as freedom of expression.
2. Publishing findings openly so that research on strengthening public debate is accessible to all stakeholders and can feed into inclusive public forums.
3. Recognizing linguistic and cultural realities, particularly by testing algorithmic systems in Arabic and its dialects, which remain largely overlooked in global assessments of digital harms.

SKF’s own research underscores the need for further concrete measures. Platforms must:

1. Develop Arabic-language testing of algorithmic systems to assess risks for local users.
2. Establish fair and transparent appeal systems for content removal or account suspensions.
3. Publicly disclose communications with governments regarding content moderation and data-sharing.
4. Build structured partnerships with local NGOs to better protect journalists from online surveillance, harassment, and coordinated hate campaigns.

These steps, though resource-intensive, are necessary to ensure that platforms move beyond rhetorical commitments and begin to safeguard digital spaces as environments for healthy, safe, and accountable public debate.

CONCLUSION

Journalistic safety is not only about protecting media workers in conflict zones; it is a cornerstone of safeguarding democratic institutions and maintaining a credible counterweight to disinformation and propaganda. Without effective protection and incentives for journalists to pursue the difficult task of speaking truth to power – where it actually lays – state-sponsored narratives and military propaganda will dominate, fueling polarization and silencing dissent.

Across media outlets, journalists, non-profits, donors, and even reform-minded officials, there is one shared understanding: preventive mechanisms must be built now. Waiting to react after each crisis has proven insufficient. What is needed is not only adaptive resilience, which too often masks structural weakness, but proactive systems that can withstand shocks and protect journalists before violence escalates.

Moving forward, international institutions, public administrations, CSOs, and media organizations must display well-resourced, consistent, and coordinated efforts. This includes:

- Systematically identifying legal and resource gaps.
- Avoiding duplication by pooling resources across stakeholders.
- Establishing centralized databases to track needs and monitor distribution.

Such mechanisms would ensure fairer, faster, and more effective allocation of protective equipment, emergency housing, and financial support whenever conflict reemerges. Only through sustained, collaborative effort can journalists continue to inform the public, hold power to account, and preserve the possibility of democratic renewal in Lebanon and across the region.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Managers

1. What are the most prominent safety risks associated with journalistic coverage today?
2. What are some written and non-written procedures that are strictly followed to probe questions of journalistic safety more generally?
3. What are specific procedures taken when dealing with journalists covering conflict on the scene?
4. What are some digital security measures taken at the level of the enterprise and the individual journalist?
5. Have you received any training or support from non-profits or INGOs concerned with journalistic safety of any kind? Can you mention some initiatives?
6. What can be done to amplify the security of journalists in warzones? What support programs do you believe may be useful on this note?

Journalists

1. What are the most prominent safety risks associated with journalistic coverage today?
2. What are some written and non-written procedures that are strictly followed to probe questions of journalistic safety more generally?
3. What are specific procedures taken when covering conflict on the scene?
4. Are you satisfied with the safety procedures taken by your enterprise?
5. Have you received any training or support from non-profits or INGOs concerned with journalistic safety of any kind? Can you mention some initiatives?
6. What can be done to amplify the security of journalists in warzones? What support programs do you believe may be useful on this note?

Non-profits

1. What forms of safety training and programs do you provide journalists?
2. Are you satisfied with the procedures put forth by most media organizations today?
3. What are some key procedures and programmatic training that ought to be incorporated?
4. Is digital and on-ground safety amid war deteriorating in the Lebanese scene?
5. What are some structural obstacles in the face of optimizing safety procedures?

Donors

1. What programs have donors previously supported and funded which proved effective in terms of ensuring journalistic protection and digital safety?
2. What are the considerations and priorities of most donors today considering structural and logistical complications and limitations?

State Officials

3. What actions has the state, in its different ministerial and administrative capacities, following the killing of journalists and media workers in the past two years?
4. What should be prioritized in the direction of challenging the impunity accompanied by war crimes in the field?
5. Are media outlets channeling these challenges in a responsible fashion? What penalties have state officials elaborated or implemented to ensure media outlets take journalistic safety very seriously?

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Program Manager: Christelle El-Hayek

Supervisor: Ayman Mhanna

Design: Marc Rechdane

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Address: Riverside Bloc C
6th floor, Charles Helou Street
Sin el-Fil, Metn – Lebanon

Tel: +961 1 499012
info@skeyesmedia.org
skeyesmedia.org