

PALESTINE

Annual Report 2014

The Gaza War Takes a Heavy Toll on Journalists' Lives

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In 2014, the state of media and cultural freedom in the West Bank and Gaza improved significantly. The reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah led to a strong decline in the number of violations against journalists in both regions; arrests were reduced by half in comparison with last year. However, the Israeli attacks have drastically increased, particularly during the 51-day war on Gaza, when Israel committed a massacre against Palestinian journalists and media professionals.

Israel's impunity on the world stage allowed its soldiers to resort to all forms of repression against journalists in the West Bank and the 1948 Territories, to prevent them from covering protests and clashes with young Palestinians. Arrests flared up, including journalists working for Hamas-affiliated satellite channel *Al-Aqsa*. Violations also continued against Palestinians on a cultural level, in an Israeli attempt to curb the free expression of their Arab identity.

The reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas healed divisions within the Palestinian media. Both the deposed Hamas government in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank allowed the redistribution of newspapers linked to the rival group in the two regions after a seven-year ban. However, this agreement did not stop journalists from being summoned, questioned and arrested.

The West Bank

Israeli soldiers attacked journalists with real and rubber-coated bullets, as well as teargas and stun grenades. They also beat them and destroyed their equipment to prevent them from covering the weekly protests. The frequency of violations increased when journalists were covering clashes between Israeli soldiers and young Palestinians in the West Bank, in protest

against the Israeli attack on Gaza. Several journalists suffered injuries and burns: Anadolu agency photographer Moaz Mishaal was hit by 12 rubber-coated bullets in the feet and Pal Media photographer Abdul-Ghani Al-Natsheh was hit in the head and suffered a serious injury to his left eye as a result. Also, soldiers used journalists, such as the European Pressphoto Agency (EPA) photographer Alaa Badarneh as human shields during weekly protests to protect themselves from stone throwers.

Israeli forces broke into three media outlets, including that of Al-Ayyam Press Printing Publishing and Distribution Company, which had begun to print three dailies from the Gaza Strip following the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement, namely *Falasteen* (Palestine), *Al-Risala* (The Message) and *Al-Istiqlal* (The Independence), under the pretext that they “incite hatred against Israel.”

On the other hand, the Israeli practice of administrative detention, without charges or trial, continued, such as with journalist Ahmad Al-Khatib, who was arrested in 2014. The administrative detention of journalists Mohammad Mona and Walid Khaled has also been renewed several times since 2013. *Al-Aqsa* satellite channel took the lion’s part in terms of arrests: the channel’s director Aziz Kayed was still in prison by the end of the year while correspondents Mostafa Al-Khawja and Soheib Al-Assa were arrested then released.

On the internal Palestinian front, several journalists were summoned then transferred to the Palestinian justice following comments they published on their Facebook pages, such as Majdoline Hassouna and Qutaiba Hamada, under the pretext that they vilified the Palestinian President. Nonetheless, number of journalists refused to show up for questioning when summoned by the Palestinian security services in an attempt to put an end to these unjustified discretionary practices.

The Palestinian Authority also prevented journalists from covering events and confiscated their equipment, especially during protests against political detention or against a meeting between President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli students, and at a sit-in held by Hamas.

The Gaza Strip

The Israeli war on Gaza led to a spike in the number of violations against journalists in 2014. The Israeli war machine targeted journalists and their families, whether in their homes or offices, in an attempt to intimidate them and prevent their reporting on war crimes and other barbaric acts.

Israeli violations were however not limited to the war period. Israeli soldiers attacked journalists with real and rubber-coated bullets and used teargas during the protests held at the eastern border of the Gaza Strip. New Media Network photographer Nasser Rahmeh was injured after being hit by a bullet in the knee.

On the other hand, the offensive aggravated the security chaos: unknown people set fire twice to the French Cultural Center in Gaza. The Center had been widely criticized by religious fundamentalists a few weeks before the first attack because of its cultural and artistic activities.

Also, 18 writers and poets received threats from the Islamic State on Facebook urging them to retract their “apostasy.”

Hamas-linked security services continued to arrest journalists for anti-Hamas writings; journalist Ayman Al-Aloul was summoned and arrested after he broadcast a video in which he made fun of the situation in the Gaza Strip. Hamas services have also been hampering the work of journalists, either by preventing them from covering protests and local developments and sometimes by beating them and destroying their equipment.

The 1948 Territories

Cultural violations skyrocketed in the 1948 Territories, in an Israeli attempt to obliterate the Palestinians’ Arab identity. Several cultural and artistic activities, such as conferences, film screenings and art workshops were banned. The Shin Bet questioned poet Muntasser Mansour and Israeli customs confiscated his books, before destroying all the copies where the word “Palestine” appears instead of the State of Israel, claiming that its content was provocative.

This year as well, Israeli police and settlers attacked journalists with teargas, stun grenades and rubber-coated bullets, causing them burns, wounds and bruises. Al-Aqsa mosque served as the main battleground for clashes. Journalists Dyala Jweihan, Mahmoud Alyan and Sinan Abu Mayzar were among the victims while Israeli attackers enjoyed full impunity

In 2014, Israeli forces arrested nine journalists who were covering protests and clashes to prevent them from documenting violations perpetrated against Palestinians within the green line. Journalist Majd Kayal was arrested for having visited Lebanon, an “enemy state.” All the journalists were eventually released after being questioned and unfair administrative decisions issued against them.

Internally, young Palestinians threatened several theater management teams asking for the suspension of a play by the satirical group “*Watan Aa Watar*” under the pretext that it “undermines Islam.”

The year 2014 came to an end, but not impunity. Israel is taking advantage of the impunity it enjoys to continue its violations against Palestinian journalists; the greatest proof is the massacre perpetrated during the summer war in Gaza and the destructions that resulted from the attack. It is therefore necessary to establish international Palestinian mechanisms to bring Israel before international courts to hold its officials accountable and deter further crimes against artists and media professionals in Palestine.

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