

GUEST ESSAY

Journalist Shireen Abu Akleh Was Killed in Jenin. Who Will Be Next?

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By Diana Buttu

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I first met the pioneering Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh more than two decades ago. She was in the early days of her career at Al Jazeera, and I was at the start of my stint as a legal adviser to the Palestine Liberation Organization.

As a newcomer to the occupied West Bank, I was in awe of Shireen's steeliness while reporting on Israel's invasion of the Jenin refugee camp in 2002. On May 11, 2022, she was killed while covering an Israeli military raid in the city. Her producer was also wounded. Both were clearly identified as journalists, wearing body armor boldly marked "press" for all to see. The evidence to date points to her being shot by an Israeli soldier, most likely a sniper. Israel said it had identified the soldier's gun that might have killed her.

The State Department has said that any investigation into her killing should be thorough, comprehensive and transparent and end with "full accountability and those responsible for her death being held responsible for their actions."

But that accountability will be hard to come by. Israel's actions in the aftermath of Shireen's killing demonstrate how the military by and large tries to evade accountability, especially when Palestinian civilians, including journalists, are killed.

Indeed, Israel's military announced it will not open an immediate criminal probe into Shireen's death, though an "operational inquiry" would continue.



Ms. Abu Akleh near the Old City of Jerusalem. Al Jazeera Media Network, via Associated Press

For that inquiry, Israeli investigators have asked the Palestinian Authority to hand over the bullet that killed Shireen, claiming that they would not be able to reach a definitive answer without this cooperation. Palestinian officials have refused, and it's not hard to see why. As Palestinian officials and human rights groups have noted, Israel has a long track record of failing to adequately investigate itself.

Moreover, any investigation into the killing of Shireen must put it in the proper light: Israel has had a contentious relationship with some of its foreign journalists. In 2017 it tried to shut down the offices of Shireen's employer, Al Jazeera, and just a year ago it bombed the offices of The Associated Press and Al Jazeera in Gaza City, destroying a 12-story building in a densely populated urban area. The military claimed that it was targeting Hamas military intelligence. But press-freedom groups accused Israel of trying to obstruct journalists, and A.P.'s president and C.E.O. at the time said there was no indication of any Hamas activity in the building.

A complaint filed at the International Criminal Court by the International Federation of Journalists and two Palestinian organizations two weeks before Shireen was killed accused Israel of systematically targeting Palestinian journalists working in the occupied territories. The Committee to Protect Journalists has confirmed the killing of 19 journalists in the occupied territories since 1992, 15 of whom were Palestinians. (Other organizations' numbers are higher; the complaint to the I.C.C. says that at least 46 journalists have been killed since 2000, not including Shireen.)

But even when Israel agrees to conduct an investigation, it often seems the outcome is all but predetermined. After an uproar over the Israeli military's open-fire policy during protests in Gaza in 2018 and 2019, which resulted in the deaths of more than 200 mostly unarmed Palestinians, Israel opened investigations into the deaths. In a review of the investigations, B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, and the Gaza-based Palestinian Center for Human Rights criticized the inquiries, saying that such investigations "are part of Israel's whitewashing mechanism, and their main purpose remains to silence external criticism, so that Israel can continue to implement its policy unchanged."

Just last month Israel's Supreme Court rejected a request by human rights organizations to reopen an investigation into the killing of four children playing on a beach in Gaza by an Israeli airstrike during the 2014 war, upholding a decision that had deemed it a "tragic accident." Yet again, no one was punished.

Only in rare instances do Israeli troops face imprisonment. Take the case of Elor Azaria, a soldier who was captured on video shooting an incapacitated Palestinian assailant in the head as he lay on the ground in Hebron in 2016. Despite visual evidence that he shot a defenseless human being, Mr. Azaria served only nine months in prison. Some Israeli cabinet

members welcomed his release, and a few said his record should be wiped clean.

When Shireen was killed, there was an immediate uproar. Her colleagues and other witnesses came forward to say that Israeli soldiers had shot her and her producer. Israeli officials were quick to deflect blame. On the day of the attack, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett repeated claims that Shireen might have been shot by a Palestinian — an assertion quickly debunked by B'Tselem. An army spokesman even made the chilling claim that Shireen and her colleague were “armed with cameras.” Only belatedly did Israel acknowledge that she may have been hit by Israeli fire.

Two days after she was killed, Shireen was buried in East Jerusalem. During the funeral procession, Israeli police beat mourners and pallbearers, nearly causing them to drop her coffin. Police seized the Palestinian flag from it and her hearse.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that the United States was “deeply troubled” by the images. In a recent letter, 57 U.S. lawmakers have demanded that the State Department and Federal Bureau of Investigation begin an investigation into Shireen’s death. In response, Michael Herzog, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, said that Israeli troops “would never intentionally target members of the press.” This appears to be an attempt to absolve Israel of any wrongdoing.

The United States and the rest of the international community must ensure that there is full accountability for her death. For too long, Israeli political and military leaders have fostered an environment in which Israeli soldiers apparently consider the lives of Palestinians disposable. The very least that I, others who loved her and those who care about justice and fundamental human decency can do is demand that those responsible be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

I last saw Shireen a few days before she filmed her last report. Our final conversation was quick; she expressed condolences for the death of my father and said we should meet in person when I was next in Ramallah. I promised to do so. Instead, I walked in her funeral procession.

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