

# NO ONE IS SAFE

*By Nida Ibrahim*



**O**n the morning of Shireen Abu Akleh's shooting on May 11, 2022, I woke up to a phone call by Al Jazeera producer Rania Zabaneh. "Shireen's been shot," she said, and dissolved into tears. My first thought was that she had sustained an injury to her limbs, maybe because I often worry about that happening to me. But the voice on the other end of the line was shaky and despondent. "I'm afraid she won't make it," Rania added.

Six minutes after the Health Ministry officially announced Shireen's death, I was on air. I tried to collect my thoughts, manage my emotions, and share the little information I had about what happened. At the same time, journalists were flocking to Al Jazeera's offices. Despite the anger and shock they felt over the unjustified murder of a colleague, they also felt compelled to report on it. At a time when they were supposed to be grieving the loss of a

friend, mentor, and idol, they wanted to do Shireen's story justice.

To say that Shireen Abu Akleh is a household name is an understatement. She rose to fame in Palestine and the Arab World as she covered the largest Israeli invasion on Palestinian territory during the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000. She was there when Palestinians were killed, when homes were demolished and when an entire nation was placed under curfew. Palestinians, myself included, were glued to their TV screens as Al Jazeera provided live 24/7 coverage of the Israeli invasions into the West Bank.

It was devastating and extremely ironic now to be the one covering the aftermath of Shireen's killing, a voice I grew up listening to, a figure I highly respected, a journalist like no other. As my colleagues and I searched for meaning in Shireen's loss, we began to examine the reasons why the Israelis targeted her. For one, it was to silence us, the journalists, from covering and exposing the realities of the occupation. Also, as Israeli authorities mounted a campaign to shift the blame from them, saying that Palestinian gunmen killed Shireen, journalists were reminded once again that their role as the messengers of truth was paramount.

The former realization came a few days after Shireen's death. We were in Jenin on the day of her funeral to cover it and, for a few hours, we couldn't advance into the refugee camp to report from inside. Israeli forces raided the outskirts of the city as they had been doing in the past few months. Still, we discussed the idea of attempting to go in to report. What were the odds of Israeli soldiers killing

another journalist in Jenin on the same day Shireen's body was going to be laid to rest in Jerusalem? Should we take the risk and go inside the camp? The trauma of Shireen's death was still fresh and raw. In the end, we decided to report from Ibn Sina hospital on the edge of the camp, where ambulances brought one injured Palestinian after another.

Journalist Ali Samoudi, who was receiving treatment in the same hospital, was busy reporting as well. Wearing a hospital gown and sitting in a wheelchair, he received one phone call after another and shared information he had. A few minutes later, Shatha Hanaysha came to the hospital from inside the camp. In her press vest and helmet, she had been inside the camp, working, when her colleagues urged her to take a break and work from the hospital. Days prior, Hanaysha was filmed crouching next to Shireen after she was shot, trying to reach her, but not being able to because she was in the direct line of fire . . . and the bullets did not stop coming.

"They want us to stop reporting and I just won't give them that," she said.

When we arrived next to the tree where Shireen was murdered, I made a similar vow. "We won't be silenced. We will keep telling the story. This is also what Shireen would want us to do"—that is how I ended my report from Jenin. It aired on Friday on Al Jazeera after Shireen's body was laid to rest in Jerusalem.

It is a promise I intend to keep. But as days go by, I do not know if I can live up to it. I love telling stories; I believe that it is my calling and passion. I love

reporting from the field so much that I often underestimate the dangers associated with it. My team and I try to take as many precautions as possible, relying on our field experience and safety courses. However, Shireen's killing, and the absence of justice and accountability that followed, blurred the red lines for us, and only indicated that the situation was getting worse for journalists. Not only is it easy for Israeli forces to target and kill a journalist, but they could get away with it and with zero accountability. This continues to happen despite the fact that Israeli violations against journalists constitute war crimes and that these violations are constant, ongoing, and even documented.

I met journalists who told me that they view their careers differently now. "The world doesn't see us as equal humans," one of Shireen's friends told me. "What's the point of telling stories that don't change our reality? Our lives don't matter, let alone our deaths," she said, adding that she wanted to quit journalism. I also had moments when I felt that what we do is not important, that no one is listening no matter how loud we spoke or how well we did our jobs. The lack of accountability in Shireen's death not only had ramifications on the purpose of our work but also on how we personally deal with the traumas of reporting.

### **"No Time to Deal with Traumas"**

I can argue that no one had the time and head space to process Shireen's murder and what it meant, starting with Shireen's closest colleagues, to those who were with her when she was shot, to those who tried to rush her to the nearest hospital

but could not amid the hail of bullets.

Journalists do not have the luxury to deal with traumas, either from their daily reporting or from incidents like these. Palestinian journalists work and live a different reality than all other journalists: they cannot escape the fact that their friends, family, and nation are still living under a decades-long military occupation. For example, a foreign journalist covering Ukraine could go back home after their reporting is done. A Palestinian journalist has nowhere else to go.

Detachment from this reality is impossible. What is worse is that Palestinian journalists cannot even apply PTSD therapies of war journalists because they live in a continuous cycle of trauma. The "P" in PTSD doesn't reflect their reality. There is no Post trauma, it is continuous. And that trauma is only exaggerated when we are reminded that the Palestinian narrative is often not believed.

It took six independent investigations to confirm what witnesses recounted all along about Shireen's killing: it was a targeted attack. Let's also not forget that some of those investigations were carried out by traditionally non-pro-Palestinian media organizations such as *The New York Times* and CNN.

Now imagine that after all the public uproar and the independent investigations, the shooter did not even come close to being held accountable. The Israeli army only conducted a preliminary probe and until the writing of this essay refused to launch a criminal investigation.

Moreover, when U.S. President Joe Biden visited the West Bank for a few hours in mid-July, journalists covering the press conference were not allowed to ask questions. Nevertheless, they wore black shirts with Shireen's picture, demanding justice for her murder. A picture of her took up a chair during the visit that she would have been covering.

Even when Biden spoke about Shireen, he couldn't pronounce her name correctly. He reiterated the need for "stopping the daily killing and arrests on daily basis; and holding the killers of the martyr journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh—they need to be held accountable". However, on July 4, the United States had already issued a report saying that the bullet came from the Israeli soldiers' side but couldn't determine whether it was intentional, and that the bullet was "badly damaged".

Such evasion of responsibility makes the United States appear as if it is aiding Israel in getting away with murdering a well-known Palestinian-American journalist. This could only lead to more intimidation and the targeting of more journalists.

### **Seeing Attacks on Journalists in a Different Light**

Attacks on journalists did not start with Shireen. Media sources say that since 2000, Israel has killed forty-eight journalists in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. You'd barely find a field journalist who has not been either beaten, intimidated, or arrested, if not tear-gassed or hit by rubber-coated bullets, or even live ammunition.

Palestinian photojournalist Muath

Amarneh, who lost his left eye to a rubber-coated bullet while covering a protest in 2020, bears witness to how journalists are attacked for the very reason that they're journalists. This type of Israeli intimidation only makes Palestinian journalists more adamant to continue to report on the ground. Our voices will get louder each time we feel they are pushing us away. We know that our mere presence in the field exposes the brutality of the Israeli army, even if our side of the story is constantly questioned or disputed. For example, the story of the killing of young Palestinian Nadeem Nouarra only made headlines after a CNN video disputed the Israeli narrative and showed how an Israeli sniper killed the 16-year-old boy.

Even with the relative space and importance that Shireen's story occupied, it is not common for Palestinian stories to make it to the headlines of international media outlets. The stories of Thaer Al-Yazouri or the other seventy-six Palestinians killed by Israeli forces since the beginning of 2022, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry, are not widely known. These stories are the driving force behind why Palestinian journalists continue to do their jobs. But the issue of safety has resurfaced now, raising fresh concerns.

Before Shireen's murder and in spite of all the risks detailed above, each one of us felt a relative security, particularly when we worked and moved as a group. One could be taken aback at the number of social media groups that have been created specifically for journalists to discuss coverage, share where the Israeli

army is stationed, ways to maneuver Israeli road closures, and where it was safest to stand and report, and so on.

Many Palestinian journalists thought Israel would not be able to get away with deliberately killing a journalist while the cameras were rolling. But apparently, it could . . . and it is. The Israeli state is now

emboldened by the lack of accountability. It is as if this killing has given Israel a free hand against any Palestinian.

We know what it means when the world turns a blind eye. The only way Israel interprets this is that the world does not care. Shireen's killing has only confirmed that no one is safe. ®