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Gaza suffocated by information: A lethal conflict also for journalists

Already in those first hours of the conflict, the IFJ reminded the world of a painful truth: that "the war of communication is intense, and that each side defends its truth". Banned from working in the Gaza Strip – nothing less than a gigantic open-air prison for Palestinian civilians – many foreign journalists too often use secondary sources or "official" sources from each side, but without being able to verify their veracity.



In the last three weeks of October, more than thirty journalists lost their lives while reporting from the Gaza Strip. The conflict, with the corollary of tens of thousands of victims, does not exclude press workers. For the [International Federation of Journalists \(IFJ\)](http://www.ifj.org), an organization based in Brussels, Belgium, which brings together more than 600,140 communicators from ∞ countries, it is essential that the protagonists of this new conflict respect the right to information.



Members of the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists in Naplusa_Cisjordanian in early October. Photo: Zain Jaafar_AFP_sitio IFJ website

"Respect the safety of journalists in Gaza"

On his recent visit to Switzerland, French journalist Anthony Bellanger, current secretary general of the IFJ, confirmed from Bern, Lausanne and Geneva the call made by the IFJ on 13 October to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which also deals with major issues related to information. "Media workers in areas of armed conflict must be treated and protected as civilians and allowed to carry out their work without interference," Bellanger said.



Anthony Bellanger, IFJ general secretary, met Stephanie Vonarburg, vice-president of the Swiss journalists' union SYNDICOM, in Bern on 31 October. Photo: syndicom

He previewed the efforts that his organization is making to UNESCO to obtain exceptional solidarity support that will allow Palestinian journalists to buy bulletproof vests, helmets and first aid equipment. The request also includes the means to establish a press house in Khan Younes, Gaza, to enable foreign journalists based in Cairo and entering through Rafah to properly carry out their professional duties in the field.

Just a few days ago, the IFJ urged the protagonists of the conflict "to do everything possible to safeguard journalists and media professionals". And he reminded them that "there is intense interest (and great concern) around the world about this conflict, but that people will only be able to understand what is really going on if journalists are allowed to do their job."

According to the non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders, [Israel is "suffocating journalism in Gaza."](#) Its Secretary General, Christophe Deloire, condemned the media blockade that Israel is trying to impose and said that "journalism is the antidote to the disinformation that is spreading with particular force in this region."



Journalistic work in Gaza is hampered by growing insecurity. Photo: France 24

Faced with the dramatic situation experienced by women and men of the press in this area of the Middle East, on 2 November the IFJ issued a new statement of position with the personalised signature of more than 70 of its member unions and associations from various continents. It reiterates the "deep concern for the plight of all journalists and media workers covering the conflict." And he points out that this situation becomes more pressing ["after Israel announced on October 27 that it would not guarantee the safety of journalists in Gaza."](#)

"We reject this policy and demand that Israeli ministers and military commanders comply with international law," the IFJ stresses, noting that since Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October and at the time of writing, 29 Palestinian journalists, four Israelis and one Lebanese journalist have been killed, and that many others (both Palestinians and Israelis) have been injured or missing.



On October 27, Israel told AFP and Reuters that it could not secure journalistic work in Gaza. Photo: Mohammed Abed, AFP, IFJ website

In its statement, the IFJ calls on Israel "to comply fully with international humanitarian law and international human rights law and to act to prevent the commission of any crime under international law, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, as well as incitement to commit them." Article 79 of the Geneva Convention states that "in war zones, journalists must be treated as civilians and protected as such as long as they do not take part in hostilities." The IFJ demands respect for this article, the contravention of which would constitute a war crime, and demands the standardization of communication systems in Gaza. Specifically, access to the Internet, which is often unavailable, which "violates the fundamental human right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any medium and regardless of frontiers."

An information war

The communication of the figures regarding the number of victims and the impact of the conflict are part of this war in the Gaza Strip, which is already as dramatic as it is global. U.S. President [Joe Biden himself weighed in on the controversy over the veracity of the data on deaths and injuries](#). The information war inherent in this conflict has already set in, and without journalists on the ground, truthful sources and the dissemination of objective information vanish.

On the last Monday of October, the [United Nations reported](#) that "as much-needed aid begins to reach Gaza, the war for the truth is intensifying as social media feeds contradictory narratives about the situation."



Significant areas of Gaza were destroyed by Israeli shelling and attacks. Photo: Mohammed Hinnawi, UNRWA

UN News said that "in the wake of Hamas' October 7 attacks on Israel, harmful disinformation about the ongoing conflict continues to circulate, which could have dangerous consequences on the ground." And he stressed the need for truly truthful information: "While disinformation can be the result of the accidental spread of falsehoods, it can also be the result of intentional dissemination by state agents. In the case of armed conflict, for example, to influence public opinion or politics, and it can affect all areas of development, from peace and security to humanitarian aid."

With the eyes of the whole world on the border crossing in Rafah, Egypt, from 22 October onwards, images of convoys that were finally able to enter Gaza loaded with humanitarian aid flooded social networks. At the same time, *UN News* says, misinformation multiplied about what those trucks contained and also about how that aid reached its destination, a besieged enclave of 363 square kilometers where 2.3 million people live, of whom 1.4 million are displaced by hostilities.

The UN itself provided examples of lies that have circulated as truthful information. Among others, she and some of her subsidiary organizations in the region, such as the [Palestine Refugee Agency](#) (UNRWA), "were selling sacks of wheat at exorbitant prices in Gaza." Nothing could be further from the truth, as UNRWA continues to provide bread to the displaced in its shelters and has distributed free wheat flour to boost production in some 16 bakeries. The agency has supported Palestine refugees since 1950 and remains the UN's main humanitarian aid agency in Gaza. For its part, the World Food Programme (WFP) secured free flour for 23 other bakeries in the conflict zone.

"Liestravel much faster than true facts," [Melissa Fleming](#), the UN's under-secretary-general for global communications, said recently. "Once again," according to Fleming, "the fog of war is driving the spread of hate and lies on the internet, resulting in dangerous mistakes with real consequences in real time." The senior UN official noted that, "in this regard, hate speech and disinformation, already widespread, flood social networks, distorting perceptions and increasing the risk of further violence." And he stressed "the importance of obtaining news from reliable sources and redoubling efforts for the United Nations to impose its own barriers against the spread of harmful content."



Photo World Food Programme

To counter disinformation and promote what the United Nations calls "information integrity," its agencies are stepping in to provide truthful facts and correct harmful fake news, by contacting the media directly and reporting on their digital platforms about what is happening on the ground in Gaza.

Ethics above all else

On 19 October, twelve days after the start of the conflict in Gaza, the IFJ reminded journalists in general and its members in particular of the need to respect the professional principles affirmed by the [World Charter of Ethics for Journalists](#).



[Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists](#)

"Unverified information, unsourced videos and images from social media: the war between Hamas and Israel is also a war of communication," the International Federation of the sector recently denounced, reiterating that the professional principles of journalism must be absolutely respected. "The duty of journalism," he emphasized, "is to provide information of public interest."

Already in those first hours of the conflict, the IFJ reminded the world of a painful truth: that "the war of communication is intense, and that each side defends *its* truth". Banned from working in the Gaza Strip – nothing less than a gigantic open-air prison for Palestinian civilians – many foreign journalists too often use secondary sources or "official" sources from each side, but without being able to verify their veracity. According to the IFJ, "this is to the detriment of citizens, one of whose fundamental rights is to be well informed". "No other conflict in modern times," the IFJ concludes, "has proved so lethal for media workers in such a short period of time."

Sergio Ferrari from Bern to La Pluma, November 4, 2023

Edited by [Maria Piedad Ossaba](#)

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