

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 23, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

It has now been over a month since American citizen and journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was shot to death while reporting on an Israeli military operation in the West Bank city of Jenin. Since that time, there has been no significant progress toward the establishment of an independent, thorough, and transparent investigation into her killing. We believe that, as a leader in the effort to protect the freedom of the press and the safety of journalists, and given the fact that Ms. Abu Akleh was an American citizen, the U.S. government has an obligation to ensure that a comprehensive, impartial, and open investigation into her shooting death is conducted — one in which all parties can have full confidence in the ultimate findings.

It is clear that neither of the parties on the ground trust the other to conduct a credible and independent investigation. Therefore, at this point, we believe the only way to achieve that goal is for the United States to be directly involved in investigating Ms. Abu Akleh's death. Last month, 57 members of the House of Representatives requested that the State Department and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) launch an independent investigation under U.S. auspices to determine the truth. We join in that request, which has been made even more urgent by the new information that has emerged in recent weeks.

Video footage confirms that Ms. Abu Akleh and her journalist colleagues were wearing helmets and protective blue vests identifying themselves as members of the press at the time of the shooting. According to one of her colleagues, the group stood in front of the Israeli military convoy to ensure the soldiers knew they were members of the news media before moving toward the entrance of Jenin refugee camp.¹ Minutes later, Ms. Abu Akleh was fatally shot in the head, and another journalist, Ali al-Samoudi, was wounded by a shot in the back.

Israeli authorities have said that Ms. Abu Akleh was killed in an exchange of fire between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants.² However, since Ms. Abu Akleh's death, a number of respected independent news organizations have reached a different conclusion. These organizations, including *The Washington Post*,³ *CNN*,⁴ and the *Associated Press*,⁵ reviewed video feed, photos and geospatial images of the scene; interviewed individuals present; and consulted with outside

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/24/middleeast/shireen-abu-akleh-jenin-killing-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>

² <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-05-11/ty-article/.premium/initial-idf-probe-not-clear-if-reporter-was-killed-by-israeli-or-palestinian-fire/00000180-d633-d572-aba5-debf984c0000>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/shireen-abu-akleh-death/>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/24/middleeast/shireen-abu-akleh-jenin-killing-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/politics-west-bank-middle-east-israel-8df6c999627efcef2fe0ca2b401e7a2c>

experts. They have concluded that there was no Palestinian gunfire emanating from the location of the shooting at the time of Ms. Abu Akleh's killing.

Israeli military authorities have stated that it is vital to their investigation that the Palestinian Authority provide them with the bullet removed from Ms. Abu Akleh's head. The Palestinian Authority has refused this request, stating that it will only provide the bullet to an outside third party or UN investigation.⁶ On May 26, the Palestinian Authority's investigation concluded that an Israeli soldier deliberately shot Ms. Abu Akleh in the head with an armor piercing bullet. Israeli Minister of Defense Gantz responded that, "Any claim that the IDF intentionally harms journalists or uninvolved civilians, is a blatant lie."⁷ This impasse further underscores the need for the U.S to be directly involved in any investigation.

On the day Shireen Abu Akleh was shot and killed, an Israeli military spokesperson, Ran Kochav, stated that Ms. Abu Akleh and her film crew "were armed with cameras, if you'll permit me to say so."⁸ We know you agree that journalists must be able to perform their jobs without fear of attack. As you stated just weeks ago on World Press Freedom Day: "The free press is not the enemy of the people. Quite the opposite...the free press is the guardian of truth."⁹ In order to protect freedom of the press, a thorough and transparent investigation under U.S. auspices must be conducted to get to the truth and provide accountability for the killing of this American citizen and journalist.

Thank you for your timely consideration of this matter. We respectfully look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

⁶ <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/article-706666>

⁷ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pa-probe-claims-idf-deliberately-shot-journalist-as-she-fled-israel-a-blatant-lie/>

⁸ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/veteran-al-jazeera-journalist-shot-dead-during-israeli-raid-in-jenin/>

⁹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/03/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-occasion-of-world-press-freedom-day-2022/>



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



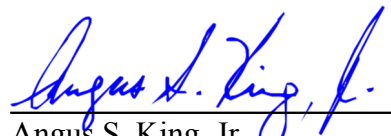
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



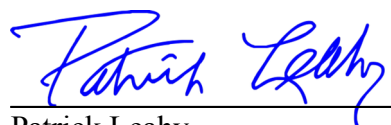
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



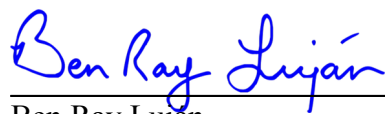
Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



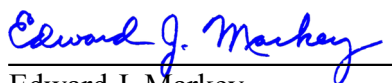
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



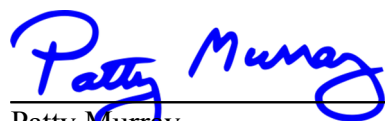
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



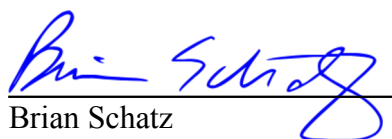
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator



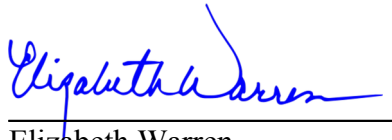
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Raphael G. Warnock
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

CC: Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
Attorney General, Merrick Garland
Federal Bureau of Investigation Director, Christopher Wray