

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 15, 2023

Dear President Biden,

We appreciate your continued engagement with Congress on issues related to the war in Gaza and welcome your efforts to secure the release of hostages, limit civilian casualties, and provide humanitarian aid to Palestinians in desperate need of assistance. We write to you today because we are deeply concerned about the inability of international journalists to enter and report from Gaza and the lack of safety for journalists covering the war in Gaza, which keeps the public from understanding the full dimensions of this war. We were glad to see Secretary Blinken's letter to the Agence France-Presse (AFP)<sup>1</sup> about the U.S. commitment to protecting journalists during armed conflict and his comments on the "vital importance of their mission" in recent days, but more must be done.<sup>2</sup> Hamas, a designated terrorist organization, does not respect a free press,<sup>3</sup> given its history of using propaganda and harassing, obstructing, torturing, and using physical violence against journalists in Gaza—actions that must be condemned and stopped.<sup>4</sup> Israeli journalists were among the 1,200 killed in Hamas's unspeakably brutal attacks on October 7th.<sup>5</sup> As Israel addresses legitimate and ongoing threats from Hamas, we ask you to further urge the Israeli government, as well as the Egyptian government, to respect press freedom by allowing all interested journalists to report without restriction from Gaza, with the exception of operational security requirements for embedded journalists, and provide journalists with the appropriate protections to carry out their essential work.

News organizations, including those in Israel, are not able to independently access Gaza. In November, 11 news organizations sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi urging them to allow their journalists into Gaza to report on the war.<sup>6</sup> According to the Israeli government, over 2,000 international journalists have come to Israel since October 7th.<sup>7</sup> A small number of reporters have been allowed to access Gaza as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.barrons.com/news/blinken-says-gaza-journalists-must-be-protected-from-harm-letter-to-afp-60389c66>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-jake-tapper-of-cnn-state-of-the-union-3/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/end-impunity-2022/article/palestine-hamas-arrests-journalist-exposing-corruption-in-gaza>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/03/gaza-hamas-must-end-brutal-crackdown-against-protesters-and-rights-defenders/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://cpj.org/2023/12/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-13-23/h\\_b4ce3a5f9030bf42fd128f1b2727427d?](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-11-13-23/h_b4ce3a5f9030bf42fd128f1b2727427d?utm_term=16999210060687af117c49e76&utm_source=cnn_Reliable+Sources+-+Nov.+13%2C+2023&utm_medium=email&bt_ee=zzSXU2WrXOfdQxCbDJBV0abkUh1Mmsxf602ICRYP0uLFx39veUhzIvQhXk%2BgOoJB&bt_ts=1699921006071)

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.jns.org/over-2000-reporters-descend-on-israel-to-cover-war/#:~:text=Since%20Hamas%20launched%20the%20ongoing,country%20to%20cover%20the%20conflict.>

part of a tour organized by Israel Defense Forces (IDF).<sup>8</sup> Under this arrangement, journalists must remain with the IDF, and in some cases, face requirements to submit their footage to the IDF for review before publication.<sup>9</sup> One journalist has been able to enter and report from Gaza without IDF supervision, but only for a matter of hours at a United Arab Emirates field hospital in southern Gaza.<sup>10</sup> Other journalists who have requested to enter Gaza through the Rafah crossing have been refused, receiving conflicting answers from the Egyptian and Israeli governments about why they are unable to cross the border.<sup>11</sup> This setup is wholly inadequate and severely restricts the flow of independent information.

Reporting on military operations is a dangerous, but extremely important, job. Today, journalists are risking their lives reporting from conflict zones around the globe, including in Ukraine, to share stories about the reality and impacts of war with the world. Israel, which almost entirely controls access to Gaza, allowed international (though, not Israeli) journalists access to the territory during its 2014 military offensive, permitting in-depth, on-the-ground reporting on the war.<sup>12</sup> Journalists understand that entering a warzone puts themselves in harm's way, but they should be the ones to decide their risk tolerance, not the Israeli or Egyptian governments. You spoke of the importance and the costs of reporting on the war in Ukraine last year, honoring the "courage and sacrifice of journalists around the world."<sup>13</sup> Let us listen to the nearly 100 French journalists who signed a petition calling for international journalists to be allowed to report in Gaza, writing "Let us enter the Gaza Strip to do our job. We know the risks."<sup>14</sup>

Access for international journalists is even more important given the dire situation facing Gazan reporters. Since October 7th, the world has relied on Gazan journalists, many of them freelancers, to report on and share information. They, at great risk to themselves, have continued working while fleeing their homes, losing family members, and living under constant threat of violence. The scale of the killings of journalists and media workers is unprecedented in recent times.<sup>15</sup> In October, the IDF told Reuters and AFP that it cannot guarantee the safety of their journalists during IDF operations in Gaza, and devastatingly, dozens of journalists in Gaza have been killed, as have reporters working outside Gaza on the Lebanese border.<sup>16</sup> Others are injured and unable to leave Gaza. With no new reporters or media workers allowed to enter Gaza, there is no flexibility for rotating people in and out of the field. Palestinian journalists in Gaza are cut off from international support, so have been unable to receive personal protective gear, including bulletproof vests and helmets. Media and communications blackouts limit their ability to report and publish information. The inability for reporters or their families to leave Gaza leaves them

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/11/1212467226/why-its-so-hard-for-journalists-to-report-from-gaza#:~:text=Israel%2C%20which%20is%20bombing%20Gaza,those%20trying%20to%20report%20it.>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/11/04/inside-gaza-israel-defense-forces-operations-diamond-dnt-nr-vpx.cnn>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/12/14/clarissa-ward-on-ground-in-gaza-kc-vpx.cnn>

<sup>11</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-investigation-how-egypt-implicit-reporting-blockade-gaza>

<sup>12</sup> [https://archives.cjr.org/feature/journalists\\_israel\\_palestine\\_conflict.php#:~:text=In%202014%2C%20Israel%20again%20allowed,pushed%20to%20extremes%20of%20experience.](https://archives.cjr.org/feature/journalists_israel_palestine_conflict.php#:~:text=In%202014%2C%20Israel%20again%20allowed,pushed%20to%20extremes%20of%20experience.)

<sup>13</sup> <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/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/291023/conflit-au-proche-orient-proteger-les-journalistes-et-assurer-leur-libre-acces-aux-zon>

<sup>15</sup> <https://cpj.org/full-coverage-israel-gaza-war/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-says-it-cant-guarantee-journalists-safety-gaza-2023-10-27/>

trapped in a humanitarian nightmare. The international community must make clear that those restrictions on or mistreatment of journalists is unacceptable.

Without protections for journalists in Gaza and access for international journalists, the world is unable to get a complete and accurate understanding of events. Journalists play a vital role in a free society by holding individuals, organizations, and governments accountable for their actions. The lack of transparency caused by limited journalistic access is at odds with the obligation all governments have to allow citizens to access factual information. Especially in a time of rampant mis- and disinformation, journalists both provide the international community with up-to-date news about the war and equip the local population with potentially life-saving information about fast-changing developments.

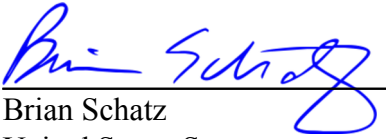
American democracy rests on a bedrock commitment to a free press and we must insist on the same from others, including our closest allies and partners. The principles for which the United States advocates send strong messages to foreign governments and help establish essential international norms.

We respectfully request your administration urge the Israeli government, and where appropriate, the Egyptian government, to:

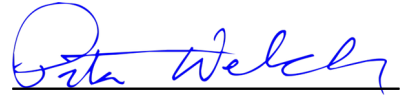
1. Expeditiously allow journalists interested in covering the war into Gaza;
2. Provide the standard protections for Palestinian journalists already in Gaza, including respecting media credentials and press insignia, and convey and follow rules of engagement regarding the press that guarantee basic protection;
3. Allow personal protective and professional equipment into Gaza to help journalists conduct their reporting duties, including bulletproof vests, helmets, and phone chargers;
4. Permit journalists in Gaza who desire to leave the territory to do so;
5. Refrain from using media and communications blackouts and take care to preserve telecommunications infrastructure needed for reporting;
6. Ensure that reporters are not to be harassed, detained, threatened or otherwise prevented from doing their jobs in areas adjacent to Gaza, including in Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, and the West Bank, and release unduly detained journalists; and
7. Conduct swift, transparent, and thorough investigations into killings and other attacks on journalists, following internationally accepted standards.

We appreciate your emphasis on protecting civilians as Israel addresses the security threats posed by Hamas. We are grateful for your leadership in negotiating the week-long humanitarian pause, which secured the release of many hostages and allowed desperately needed humanitarian assistance into Gaza. As you continue to engage with the Israeli and Egyptian governments, we ask that you advocate for the safety and freedom of journalists in this conflict.

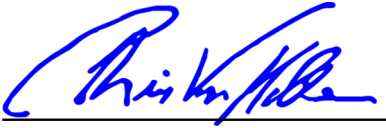
Sincerely,



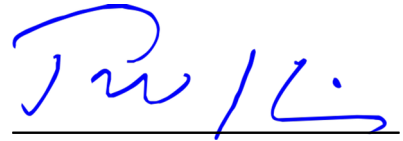
Brian Schatz  
United States Senator



Peter Welch  
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator



Tim Kaine  
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator