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Issue: Protecting journalism and freedom of speech in war zones



## Research report

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Forming a Dome of international peace

## GA 3

### Protecting journalism and freedom of speech in war zones

Deputy Chair

Julia Hibbert



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# Introduction to the topic

Journalists play an important role during armed conflict. They provide information about military developments, humanitarian conditions and the experiences of civilians, often from areas that the general public would otherwise have no access to. Their reporting can also provide evidence of possible violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. At the same time, working in a warzone exposes journalists to threats such as bombing, shootings, detention, kidnapping, censorship and restrictions on where they are allowed to travel. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) states that journalists working in armed conflict are generally considered civilians and must be protected as such as long as they do not directly participate in hostilities (ICRC, 2026).

War journalism itself has changed significantly over time. During earlier conflicts, newspapers and radio were the main ways in which information from the front reached the public. Television later made images of war much more immediate. During the Gulf War in 1991, military authorities used a “pool” system in which only selected groups of journalists received access to certain areas. During the 2003 Iraq War, the practice of embedded journalism became much more common, with journalists travelling alongside military units. Embedding can give journalists access to places that would otherwise be too dangerous or inaccessible, but it can also reduce their freedom of movement and make independent reporting more difficult (ICRC, 2026).

Access remains one of the biggest issues for war journalists today. International humanitarian law protects journalists as civilians, but it does not give journalists an unlimited right to enter every conflict area. Governments and armed forces can place certain restrictions on access for security or military reasons. However, when access becomes extremely limited, independent verification becomes more difficult and the public can become increasingly dependent on information provided by the parties involved in the conflict.

Technology has also completely changed war reporting. Smartphones and social media now allow images and information from a conflict to reach millions of people within minutes. People living inside a warzone no longer need to work for a traditional television network or newspaper to show the world what is happening around them. Citizen journalists, independent reporters and social-media creators can therefore play an important role when international media organisations have little or no physical access.

However, this creates new problems. Professional journalists normally work with editors, fact-checking procedures and established journalistic standards. Social-media content can be uploaded without going through the same process. A UNESCO study of 500 digital content creators in 45 countries found that fact-checking was not a regular practice for many creators, with two-thirds not systematically checking information before sharing it (UNESCO, 2024). At the same time, the distinction between journalist and influencer is becoming less clear. The Reuters Institute reported in 2026 that 27% of its global sample received information from news creators every week, although audiences generally viewed these creators as less

trustworthy and less impartial than traditional news organisations (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2026).

War reporting is also expensive. News organisations sending journalists into conflict areas need to consider hostile-environment training, insurance, protective equipment, secure communications, transportation, emergency evacuation plans and psychological support. Local producers, translators and drivers may also be necessary. The ACOS Alliance has specifically stated that media organisations should consider costs such as personal protective equipment, insurance, secure communications, hazard pay and emergency funds when commissioning work in warzones (ACOS Alliance, n.d.). These costs can make it increasingly difficult for smaller news organisations and freelancers to provide the same level of protection available to journalists working for large international media organisations.

# Definition of key terms

## **Freedom of Expression**

The right to hold opinions and to seek, receive and share information and ideas through different forms of communication. Article 19 of the ICCPR protects freedom of expression, although certain restrictions may be permitted when they are provided by law, necessary and proportionate for purposes such as protecting national security, public order or the rights of others (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2011).

## **Freedom of the Press**

The ability of journalists and media organisations to gather, investigate and publish information without unjustified censorship, interference or punishment from governments or other actors. Freedom of the press is closely connected to the broader right to freedom of expression.

## **Journalist**

A person involved in gathering, preparing or reporting information for the public. International humanitarian law does not contain one strict definition of a journalist. The ICRC uses a broad understanding which can include reporters, photographers, camera operators and other media professionals. Protection under international humanitarian law does not depend on whether someone works for a large media organisation or is formally accredited (ICRC, 2026).

## **War Correspondent**

A journalist who has been formally authorised to accompany the armed forces during an international armed conflict. War correspondents remain civilians, but if captured they can qualify for prisoner-of-war status under the Third Geneva Convention (ICRC, 2026).

## **Embedded Journalist**

A journalist who travels and reports alongside a military unit. “Embedded journalist” is not an official legal category under international humanitarian law. Some embedded journalists may qualify as war correspondents when formally accredited by the armed forces. Embedding can provide access and security but can also limit where journalists travel and what they are able to observe.

## **Citizen Journalist**

A person who gathers and distributes information about events without necessarily being employed as a professional journalist. Citizen journalism has become increasingly important through smartphones and social media, especially in places where professional media have limited access.

## **News Creator / Influencer**

An individual who produces and distributes information, commentary or news-related content primarily through social-media and video platforms. News creators do not necessarily follow the same editorial or professional standards as traditional journalists, although some professional journalists are also news creators.

## **Legacy Media**

Established news organisations such as newspapers, broadcasters and news agencies that existed before the rise of digital-first and social-media journalism. Examples include traditional newspapers, television broadcasters and international news agencies.

## **Press Accreditation**

Official recognition given to a journalist by a government, military organisation or other authority. Accreditation may help a journalist gain access to certain areas, but a lack of accreditation does not remove a civilian journalist's protection under international humanitarian law (ICRC, 2026).

## **Media Access**

The ability of journalists to enter locations, speak to people and obtain information necessary for reporting. In conflict situations, access can be restricted by governments, armed forces, armed groups or security conditions.

## **Censorship**

The suppression, restriction or removal of information, publications or other forms of expression. During war, censorship can sometimes be introduced for national-security reasons, but restrictions on freedom of expression must still meet international human-rights requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality.

## **Misinformation**

False or inaccurate information that is shared without necessarily intending to deceive people.

## **Disinformation**

False or misleading information that is deliberately created or spread in order to deceive or influence people.

## **Propaganda**

Information or messaging designed to influence public opinion in favour of a particular political, military or ideological objective. Propaganda does not automatically make a media organisation or journalist a lawful military target; under international humanitarian law the threshold for a civilian media object becoming a military objective is significantly higher (ICRC, 2026).

## **Impunity**

A situation in which those responsible for crimes or attacks are not investigated, prosecuted or punished. Impunity for attacks against journalists is considered an important problem because it can encourage further violence against the press.

## **Armed Conflict**

A situation involving armed confrontation between States, or between government forces and organised armed groups, or between organised armed groups themselves.

# Current Situation

The physical safety of journalists has become an increasingly serious concern in modern conflicts. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 129 journalists and media workers were killed worldwide in 2025, the highest annual total recorded by the organisation since it began collecting data in 1992. At least 104 of these deaths occurred in conflict settings. Sudan and Ukraine both saw increases in journalist deaths, while the largest number was connected to the Israel-Gaza war (CPJ, 2026b).

This does not necessarily mean that the formal international legal protection of journalists has become weaker. Journalists remain protected as civilians under international humanitarian law. Instead, the main problem is the gap between these legal standards and what happens in practice. Journalists continue to face killings, arbitrary detention, disappearances, threats and destruction of media infrastructure, while investigations into attacks are often limited. CPJ reported that very few transparent investigations were conducted into the targeted killings it documented during 2025 (CPJ, 2026b).

## The Case of Gaza

The Israel-Gaza war has become one of the most significant examples in the current discussion about journalist protection. According to a CPJ review published on 25 June 2026, the organisation had documented 209 journalists and media workers killed by Israel in Gaza and in Israeli detention centres since 7 October 2023 (CPJ, 2026a). CPJ was reviewing its database at the time after removing individuals for whom later evidence showed participation in combat or that they did not meet its criteria as journalists or media workers.

Access has also become a major issue. Since the beginning of the war, independent international journalists have generally not been permitted to report freely from inside Gaza, while some foreign correspondents have been allowed to enter under Israeli military escort. As a result, Palestinian journalists inside Gaza have carried a large part of the responsibility for documenting the conflict for international audiences. CPJ has argued that the restrictions also make independent verification of individual incidents more difficult. Israel has stated in response to incidents involving journalist deaths that its military does not intentionally target journalists, while press-freedom organisations have called for independent investigations into numerous cases.

The situation demonstrates the connection between access and safety. Restricting independent access can reduce the number of international journalists directly exposed to the fighting, but it can also place greater pressure on local journalists who cannot leave the conflict area. It also means that international news organisations become more dependent on Palestinian reporters, freelancers and camera operators working under extremely dangerous conditions.

## Sudan and Ukraine

Gaza is not the only current conflict in which journalists face serious threats. In Sudan, the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has seriously damaged the country's media sector. UNESCO reported in 2025 that approximately 90% of

Sudan's media infrastructure had been destroyed and around 1,000 journalists had been displaced (UNESCO, 2025). By April 2026, CPJ had documented at least 16 journalists and media workers killed since the beginning of the conflict.

In Ukraine, journalists continue to report from areas affected by the Russian invasion while facing artillery, missiles, mines and increasingly drones. UNESCO stated in 2025 that at least 22 media workers had been killed in the line of duty since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. CPJ recorded four journalists killed in Ukraine during 2025, all in Russian drone attacks.

## The Growing Effect of Drones

The increased use of drones has created a new safety challenge for journalists. According to CPJ, 39 journalists and media workers were killed in incidents involving drones during 2025, compared with only two recorded by CPJ in 2023. Of the 39 deaths, 28 occurred in Israeli drone strikes in Gaza, five in RSF drone strikes in Sudan, four in Russian strikes in Ukraine, one in a Houthi strike in Yemen and one in a suspected Turkish strike in Iraq (CPJ, 2026b).

Drones can observe and strike locations from a distance, meaning that journalists no longer only face danger when standing directly on a traditional front line. Vehicles, buildings and reporting positions can also be exposed. In Ukraine, CPJ reported that all four journalists killed during 2025 died in drone attacks. This development raises new questions about how journalists can make themselves identifiable as press, whether existing protective equipment is sufficient and how parties to a conflict can ensure that journalists are distinguished from combatants.

## Access and Embedded Journalism

A difficult question is how journalists should safely gain access to active conflict areas. One option is embedding, in which a journalist accompanies a military force. This can provide transportation, protection and access to areas that would otherwise be impossible to reach. However, the journalist may then see the conflict mainly from the perspective of one side and may be subject to restrictions intended to protect military operations.

Independent reporting provides journalists with more control over what they investigate, but it can also create greater physical risk. International humanitarian law does not guarantee journalists unrestricted access to conflict areas, and military authorities may legally restrict access in certain circumstances. The challenge is therefore finding a balance between legitimate security requirements and preventing access restrictions from being used unnecessarily to avoid independent reporting.

## Social Media and Conflict

Social media has made the information environment around war much faster and more complicated. Videos filmed on a smartphone can now reach an international audience before a traditional news organisation has had time to verify what happened. This can be particularly useful when journalists cannot physically reach an area, but it also increases the risk that old footage, manipulated images, propaganda or incorrect information will spread rapidly.

Traditional journalists now compete with influencers, activists and other content creators for attention. According to the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2026*, more than a quarter of the people surveyed across its markets received information weekly from news creators (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2026). These creators were often viewed as easier to understand and more entertaining, but as less trustworthy and impartial than traditional news organisations.

The difference between a journalist and influencer can also become unclear in a warzone. A local person may document airstrikes, interview civilians and publish daily updates to hundreds of thousands of followers without working for a newspaper or broadcaster. International humanitarian law does not require a journalist to belong to an established media organisation to receive civilian protection. Even people who do not meet a professional definition of journalist remain protected as civilians as long as they do not directly participate in hostilities.

## The Cost of Covering War

Physical access is also connected to money. Reporting safely from a warzone may require body armour, helmets, medical supplies, insurance, hostile-environment training, secure transportation, satellite or encrypted communications and evacuation plans. News organisations can also need local producers, translators, security advisers and drivers.

Large legacy media organisations are generally better able to pay these costs than small outlets or freelancers. Freelance and local journalists can therefore face a difficult situation: they may have the best access and local knowledge but fewer financial resources for safety. The ACOS Alliance has warned that freelancers are still sometimes expected to cover their own insurance, protective equipment and other safety costs. The Rory Peck Trust reported that demand for emergency financial support and safety training among freelance journalists increased during 2025 (Rory Peck Trust, 2026).

# Major actors

## National Governments and Armed Forces

National governments and State armed forces have an important responsibility for protecting journalists and respecting freedom of expression. Under international humanitarian law, parties to armed conflict must treat civilian journalists as civilians and may not deliberately attack them unless they directly participate in hostilities.

At the same time, governments and militaries often control access to frontlines, military areas and information. They can establish accreditation systems, organise embedded reporting or restrict access for security reasons. These powers can create tension between legitimate military security and the public's right to receive information. Under the ICCPR, restrictions on freedom of expression for national-security reasons must be provided by law and must be necessary and proportionate.

## Non-State Armed Groups

Non-State armed groups are another major actor. Journalists working in territory controlled by armed groups may face detention, kidnapping, threats or pressure over how the conflict is reported. Armed groups can also control access to certain areas and use media or social media to distribute their own political or military messages.

International humanitarian law applies to non-State parties to armed conflict as well. Civilian journalists remain protected from attack as long as they do not directly participate in hostilities.

## Journalists, Freelancers and Local Media Workers

Journalists themselves are central actors. International correspondents may receive more financial and institutional support, while local journalists usually have greater knowledge of the language, geography and community. During conflicts in which international access is restricted, local journalists can become the main source of information available to the outside world.

Freelancers also play an increasingly important role. Unlike staff journalists from large organisations, however, they may not automatically receive insurance, hostile-environment training or equipment from a media employer. Organisations such as ACOS argue that media outlets commissioning freelancers should take comparable responsibility for their safety to that provided to staff journalists.

## Traditional News Organisations

Large newspapers, broadcasters and news agencies decide where journalists are sent, how much risk is acceptable and how much money is available for protection. They are therefore important not only to press freedom but also to journalist safety.

News organisations can provide training, protective equipment, insurance, security teams and psychological support. However, the high cost of covering war can affect decisions about whether correspondents are deployed at all. If an organisation cannot afford to send a full team, it may rely more heavily on local journalists, freelancers or material obtained from social media.

## Social-Media Platforms and Content Creators

Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X and Telegram have become major parts of the modern information environment. They allow information from warzones to reach international audiences immediately, but they also decide how content is promoted, removed or restricted.

The General Assembly's 2025 resolution on journalist safety specifically called attention to the responsibility of digital platforms to take transparent measures against misinformation, disinformation and online harassment while considering the human-rights effects of their policies (United Nations General Assembly, 2025).

Content creators and influencers are also becoming more important. Some perform activities that closely resemble journalism, while others mainly offer opinion or commentary. UNESCO has begun programmes aimed at bringing journalists, fact-checkers and digital creators together because of concerns about verification and misinformation.

## UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is one of the main UN organisations working on press freedom and journalist safety. UNESCO maintains an Observatory of Killed Journalists, supports safety programmes and asks governments for information about investigations into journalist killings.

## Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

The OHCHR plays an important role in protecting freedom of expression as an international human right. It monitors violations, works with UN human-rights mechanisms and supports the implementation of the ICCPR.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression also investigates issues affecting journalists and can communicate concerns to governments.

## International Committee of the Red Cross

The ICRC is especially important in armed conflict because it promotes respect for international humanitarian law. It reminds parties to conflicts that civilian journalists are protected in the same way as other civilians and explains the legal status of journalists, war correspondents and embedded reporters.

The ICRC does not act as a press-freedom organisation and does not guarantee journalists access to warzones. Its role is mainly connected to the humanitarian rules that parties to armed conflicts must respect.

## Press-Freedom Organisations

Non-governmental organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Rory Peck Trust monitor attacks against journalists and provide different types of support.

CPJ documents deaths, detentions and attacks and provides safety information. The Rory Peck Trust particularly supports freelance journalists with financial assistance, safety training and psychological support. These organisations can also draw international attention to cases where journalists have been attacked or denied access.

# Previous International action

## Universal Declaration of Human Rights

One of the foundations of international protection for free expression is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Article 19 states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the freedom to seek, receive and share information and ideas through any media.

Although the Declaration itself is not a treaty, it created an important foundation for later legally binding human-rights agreements.

## International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

In 1966, the United Nations adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 protects freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information.

Unlike freedom of opinion, freedom of expression can be subject to certain restrictions. However, such restrictions must be provided by law and necessary for specific purposes, such as protecting national security, public order or the rights of others. The Human Rights Committee has emphasised that these restrictions must also be proportionate and cannot simply be used as a general justification for censoring journalism (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2011).

## Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I

International humanitarian law provides a second form of protection. Article 4A(4) of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 recognises accredited war correspondents accompanying armed forces and provides them with prisoner-of-war status if captured during an international armed conflict.

In 1977, Additional Protocol I, particularly Article 79, made the position of journalists clearer by confirming that journalists carrying out dangerous professional missions in armed conflict are considered civilians. They therefore may not be deliberately attacked unless they directly participate in hostilities. This principle is also recognised in customary international humanitarian law for non-international armed conflicts (ICRC, 2026).

## Security Council Resolution 1738

In 2006, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1738. The resolution specifically condemned intentional attacks against journalists, media professionals and associated personnel during armed conflict.

It also repeated that journalists must be treated as civilians as long as they do not take actions that remove their civilian protection, and called on parties to armed conflicts to respect the professional independence and rights of journalists (United Nations Security Council, 2006).

## UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists

In 2012, the United Nations endorsed the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. The Plan takes a broader approach than simply responding after a journalist is attacked.

Its main approach is built around prevention, protection and prosecution. UNESCO coordinates cooperation between governments, UN organisations, media organisations and civil society. The Plan also supports training, monitoring, research and stronger national laws protecting journalists (UNESCO, 2012).

## Security Council Resolution 2222

In 2015, Security Council Resolution 2222 further strengthened international attention to the protection of journalists during armed conflict. The resolution reaffirmed that journalists, media professionals and associated personnel are civilians and called on parties to conflicts to respect their safety.

The resolution also addressed the wider problem of impunity and the importance of holding people responsible for serious attacks on journalists (United Nations Security Council, 2015).

## Pact for the Future

In 2024, UN Member States adopted the Pact for the Future. Among its commitments relating to armed conflict, States reaffirmed the need to respect and protect journalists, media professionals and associated personnel and again recognised their civilian status under international humanitarian law.

## General Assembly Resolution 80/217

One of the most recent international actions is especially relevant to GA3. In December 2025, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 80/217, The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, without a vote. The resolution originated in the Third Committee.

The resolution addresses physical violence, online harassment, disinformation, Internet shutdowns and restrictions on access to information. It calls on States to improve prevention and investigations, provide support to journalists facing threats and cooperate with UNESCO and other international organisations. It also calls on digital platforms to consider their effect on journalist safety and to create better systems for reporting online threats.

## Remaining Challenges

A large international framework for protecting journalists already exists. The main difficulty is therefore not that journalists have no protection under international law, but that these rules are often difficult to enforce during active conflict.

Governments and armed groups may control access to areas where possible violations have taken place. Investigations can become impossible because evidence is destroyed, witnesses are displaced or authorities do not cooperate. Local journalists may have little protection, while independent international reporters may be unable to enter the territory.

Technological changes create additional challenges that older international agreements could not fully anticipate. Drones have changed the physical dangers of reporting, while social media has blurred the distinction between professional journalists, citizen journalists and influencers. At the same time, Internet shutdowns, online harassment and disinformation can restrict journalism without any physical attack taking place.

The challenge for the international community is therefore not only to create new rules, but also to make existing protections work in modern conflicts while balancing the physical safety of journalists, legitimate security concerns, access to information and freedom of expression.

## Further reading

### [International Committee of the Red Cross – How does international humanitarian law protect journalists in armed conflict?](#)

This source explains the legal status of journalists, war correspondents and embedded journalists and gives a clear overview of how international humanitarian law applies to the media.

### [UNESCO – UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#)

This source explains the main UN strategy for preventing violence against journalists, protecting media workers and improving accountability for attacks.

### [United Nations General Assembly – Resolution 80/217: The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#)

This is especially useful for delegates because the resolution was prepared through GA3 and shows what the General Assembly has recently already agreed on.

### [Committee to Protect Journalists – Record 129 Press Members Killed in 2025](#)

This report contains recent information about journalist deaths in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine and other conflicts, including the increasing use of drones.

### [Reuters Institute – Digital News Report 2026](#)

This research is useful for understanding the growing role of social media, influencers and news creators and how they compare with traditional journalism.

### [ACOS Alliance – Freelance Journalist Safety Principles](#)

This source focuses on practical responsibilities for media organisations and freelancers working in dangerous environments.

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