

Palestinian female journalists are exposed to murder, detention, and house arrest at every moment

Azizah Nofal

West Bank:

"During my arrest, I was subjected to insults, beatings, and numerous threats," said journalist Sojoud Assi, 31 years old, describing her experience during her arrest by Israeli forces on October 28.

Assi, a journalist working as an editor for Al-Hadath local newspaper, was arrested and detained for a day to pressure her husband, fellow journalist Mohammad Assi, to surrender himself. During her detention, Israeli investigators interrogated her about her journalistic activities and threatened her. "During the investigation, the officer repeatedly accused me of incitement through my journalism. He questioned me about the organizations I work with and the nature of my reporting," she added.



(Journalist Sojoud Assi)

During her arrest, Sojoud was beaten and pushed by the soldiers' multiple times. Despite being in the early months of her pregnancy, the Israeli soldiers showed no consideration for her condition.

About the incident details, Assi said: "At dawn on Saturday, October 28, 2024, an occupation army force stormed my house where I and my seven-year-old daughter were alone. The soldiers brutally searched the house and vandalized it, which caused my daughter a severe state of panic. "The female soldiers took me into a room in the house alone, conducted a humiliating strip search, tied my hands, and cursed me with obscene insults."

After 12 hours of detention, Sojoud was released. She then approached international human rights institutions to file a complaint. However, they did not provide her with the support she deserved. "I am well aware that filing complaints will lead to nothing, but my intention was to expose these practices, without any expectation or confidence that any real action would be taken," she stated.

Assi is well aware that the crimes committed against her by the investigators will not be pursued and that those responsible will escape punishment and legal prosecution. However, she believes that simply submitting complaints and raising one's voice can

expose the Israel's treatment of Palestinian journalists, particularly female journalists, who face numerous violations. These violations range from being killed outright, as happened with our colleagues Shireen Abu Aqleh, Ghofran Warasneh, and other female journalists in Gaza, to being arrested, abused during detention, and having their work in the field obstructed.

Although violations against female journalists are part of a long-standing series of abuses against Palestinian journalists working in the field, there has been a noticeable increase in these violations since October 7. The Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) documented 604 violations during the period from October 2023 to the end of April 2024.

Sherine Al-Khatib, the center's coordinator, emphasizes that female journalists are integral to the broader journalistic community working in the field. However, while monitoring violations against journalists, the center notes a lower number of reported violations against female journalists. Al-Khatib attributes this phenomenon to increased fear among families, which prevents them from permitting their female journalists to work in the field. She also acknowledges the natural disparity in numbers between male and female journalists contributing to these statistics.

But according to Sherine, the type of violations is the same. After the war on the Gaza Strip on October 7, violations against journalists, and therefore female journalists, increased significantly, especially violations in the field and arrests in the West Bank.



(A picture of the child Ilia with a poster of her captive mother, Rula Hassanein)

Investigators bargain over the motherhood of female journalists

The arrests that Al-Khatib spoke about included eight female journalists, three of whom were released and five are still in occupation prisons. During these arrests, compromising the motherhood of female journalists was not limited to Assi's case alone. Journalist Rula Hassanein, who was arrested from her home in Bethlehem, was separated from her prematurely born baby girl, who relied solely on her mother's milk for nutrition.

Hassanein's lawyer attempted to secure her release on these grounds, particularly after her baby's health deteriorated, necessitating hospitalization for intravenous nutrition.

Unfortunately, this effort did not succeed, and since her arrest on March 19, 2024, she continues to face charges of incitement on social media.

Hassanein, who works as an independent editor and journalist, was previously arrested and incited by a page called “Nazi Hunters” run by Israeli settlers on the “Telegram” platform.

As of now, Hassanein remains under trial on charges of incitement based on her social media postings, similar to other female journalists who were previously arrested and subsequently released.

For these female journalists, the charges against them were clear. However, many others remain in jail under administrative detention, held based on a secret file known only to the Israeli prosecution and undisclosed to the detainees or their lawyers.

Three female journalists are subjected these days (June 2024) to this arrest. The first one is the independent journalist and researcher Asmaa Harish, the second one is journalist Ikhlas Sawalha, and the third one is journalist Bushra Al-Taweel, who was arrested on March 7, 2024.



(Imprisoned journalist Bushra Al-Taweel)

It is prohibited to wear Hijab inside the prison

During her arrest, Al-Taweel was beaten, insulted, and forcibly deprived of wearing her hijab. According to what the lawyer informed her family, she was immediately transferred to administrative detention without undergoing any interrogation.

Her mother, Muntaha Al-Tawil, says: “When she received the administrative detention order, it was printed in advance stating that her detention begins on March 14, 2024, that is, seven days after her arrest, which indicates that this detention is without reason.”

What makes her family asserts that Al-Tawil’s arrest was due to her journalistic work, is her repeated arrest and transfer to administrative detention each time, in addition to a large number of summonses - she is contacted by the intelligence commander of the

Ramallah and Al-Bireh region and asked to visit the Israeli intelligence headquarters to investigate her - which each time revolves around her journalistic work: The officer was telling us during her arrest, “Your daughter has a loud voice. “These arrests prevented Al-Taweel from practicing her journalistic work, which she began by writing about the stories of prisoners inside prisons. The first arrest was against her journalistic work in 2017, and she was transferred to administrative detention for eight months.

Although her administrative detention was based on a secret file. However, the investigations were explicitly about her journalistic work.

In 2019, she was placed under administrative arrest for eight months. This time, her journalistic work was explicitly targeted. During the arrest, the occupying officer informed her father that her journalistic activities and outspoken voice were the reasons for her detention. This assertion was later confirmed by the occupying prosecution during her subsequent trial sessions, highlighting that her work in covering the news related to prisoners made her a repeated target for arrest.

Administratively detained and also banned from traveling

In 2020, Al-Taweel was administratively detained and spent 11 months in jail. She announced her intention to go on a hunger strike in protest against her detention without charge, which was based on an undisclosed secret file allegedly related to her journalistic work. In 2022, she was arrested while passing through the Zaatara checkpoint, an Israel checkpoint on the road between Ramallah and the northern West Bank. She was investigated for publishing a post about local elections on her Facebook page before being transferred to administrative detention, where she spent a total of 9 months.

During that period, Al-Taweel was prohibited from practicing journalism, prompting her to consider traveling abroad for further studies and journalistic training. However, she was surprised to find herself prohibited from traveling. Authorities proposed a deal: if she wanted to travel, she would be deported abroad and not permitted to return, as her mother recounts: “They treated Bushra’s profession as their number one enemy.”



(Journalist Majdoleen)

It is forbidden to travel, neither for work nor to receive an award from Paris

The travel ban didn't just impact Al-Taweel. Journalist Majdoleen Hassouneh, who works with the Turkish channel TRT in Istanbul, faced obstacles that hindered her journalistic work and now faces the threat of not receiving her monthly wages. Hassouneh's suffering began when she visited her family in the city of Nablus in 2019. When she wanted to travel back after spending her holiday with her family, she was prevented from traveling by the Israeli side at the "Allenby" Bridge Crossing - the side of the land crossing through which Palestinians travel to Jordan and from there to the world, noting that this bridge is controlled by Israel. She tried to pursue the matter legally on a personal level. Also, the media agency she works for, and Reporters Without Borders, intervened, but she was unable to travel, which makes her feel that "Israel" is far from accountability with regard to the violations it carries out against Palestinian journalists, male and female.

In 2021, Hassouna won the Journalist of the Year Award/freelance category, which is awarded annually by Reporters Without Borders, although she was also unable to travel to receive the award in Paris.

Hassouneh says about the impact of her travel ban on her: "I feel like I am trapped in my house and that all my ambitions are collapsing. I am deprived of travel and all my subsequent plans are frozen."

Hassouneh had obtained acceptance from a Turkish university to complete her graduate studies, in addition to the possibility of getting promoted in her job, which depends on her presence at the agency's headquarters in Turkey.

Regarding the financial aspect, after being prevented from traveling, she reached a temporary arrangement with her employer to work remotely. Her wages continued to be transferred to her bank account in Turkey, and she withdraws them using an ATM card. Recently, however, she received a message from the bank indicating that she needs to renew her card, a process that requires her personal presence. As a result, she is now unable to access her wages.

This is in addition to the pressure imposed on her regarding switching her contract to a "freelance" contract due to her inability to manage the work team remotely, which threatens her journalistic work.



(Journalist Sumayyah Jawabreh)

House arrest and forbidden from speaking to the press

During the war on the Gaza Strip, Palestinian female journalists faced numerous violations, including the case of journalist Sumayya Jawabreh, who was subjected to house arrest.

This form of arrest had previously been applied to journalist Lama Abu Ghosh from the occupied city of Jerusalem in 2022. She was arrested, and her cellular devices and personal computer were confiscated. Subsequently, she was placed under house arrest for 11 months, during which multiple court sessions were held. Eventually, she was sentenced to 9 months of community service, a 6-month suspended sentence for a period of 3 years, and a fine of 4,500 shekels (\$1,200).

In the case of Jawabreh, this house arrest was suspended, and she was released for humanitarian and health reasons. Firstly, she was arrested after being summoned from her home in the city of Nablus to the Huwara Investigation Center near the city in November 2023, and she was charged with incitement on social media sites.

Jawabreh was seven months pregnant at the time of her house arrest. After eight days, her lawyer successfully secured a decision to release her from the conditions of house arrest.

We met Jawabreh at her home in the city of Nablus, but she was unable to talk to us because she was prohibited from talking to the media, so her husband, journalist Tariq Yousef, was a mediator between us.

Jawabreh's case was the first of its kind in the West Bank. Faced with limited options, she agreed to be released under house arrest. However, the Israeli authorities exploited this decision to impose even more restrictions, depriving her of both practicing her journalistic work and living a normal life.

Her husband Yousef says: We were not aware of all these conditions of house arrest. Sumayya expressed to me more than once that she wished she had not been released."

In detail, Jawabreh was released on a financial bail of 10,000 shekels (\$2,500) and a third-party bail of 50,000 shekels (\$12,500). She was subjected to a complete ban on using the Internet or a cell phone and placed under home supervision by her husband and mother-in-law to ensure compliance with these conditions. These restrictions were to remain in effect until a court session scheduled for six months later.

During this period, Summaya was unable to leave the house except to go to the hospital to give birth. She hoped the decision would be finalized during the session scheduled for

May 12, 2024. However, she and her family were surprised when the lawyer informed them that the court had been postponed for an unknown period, meaning more days of detention behind the doors of her home.

Jawabreh, who was working at the “Mo3ta” media research center in addition to her work as a freelance journalist, fears losing her entire journalistic career.

Arrest and travel bans are not the only obstacles faced by Palestinian female journalists. The field of coverage is an open arena for many types of violations, the most severe of which was direct killing, as in the case of colleagues Sherine Abu Aqleh, Ghufraan and Rasnah.

Ghufraan was shot dead by an Israeli soldier while she was on her way to work at a local radio station in the city of Hebron. The soldier directly shot her near a checkpoint in June 2022. According to her family, she was only heading to her work at Dream Radio in the city of Hebron.

The fear of being killed is possible at any moment

In the field, the situation was no different, especially in the hottest areas, which are the cities of the northern West Bank. Those cities are subject to continuous raids that sometimes last for days.

Aya Al-Orouq is one of the female journalists who covers the field for Alalam Channel, for which she works as a field correspondent. She has covered all the incursions and raids in Jenin and Tulkarm from the beginning of the year 2023 until now.

Al-Orouq says that coverage in these areas was difficult, but it got worse after the war on Gaza. There is now an increase in the targeting of journalists despite their taking all safety measures in the field, in terms of moving in groups, wearing the distinctive journalistic uniform and positioning themselves in areas far from Israeli soldiers, and from any confrontations or clashes on the other hand. Additionally, every time journalists are targeted, it is with live bullets rather than warning shots in the air or tear gas.

Al-Orouq says: "Journalists are being targeted, regardless of their gender or nationality. The main goal is to prevent journalists from reporting what is happening on the ground." According to Al-Orouq, all safety measures and international laws that protect journalists in the field are worthless in light of this targeting, which has hindered her journalistic work and limited her ability to cover all events. She adds: "I often fear that another victim will fall from amongst us. After the killing of our colleague Sherine Abu Aqleh, Israel's evasion of responsibility, and the ongoing targeting of journalists in Gaza, we have no confidence that international laws are capable of condemning and punishing Israel."

Al-Orouq expressed a lack of confidence in holding Israel accountable for their crimes against journalists, a sentiment echoed by Hassounah, who believes this reflects the weakness of the local journalists' representation by their syndicate, as well as a blatant disregard of Israel for international laws and the institutions that govern such matters globally.



(Journalist Shurooq Asad)

The Syndicate: The whole world helps criminals escape punishment

Speaking about the Syndicate and its role, Shurooq Asaad believes that despite the Syndicate's continuous work, the entire global system allows Israel to escape punishment every time.

In numbers, Asaad says that the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate documented the killing of 55 journalists, including women, from the year 2000 until October 6. Later from 2012 until October 6, it recorded 9,000 violations, meaning an average of three daily violations against journalists.

On the other hand, as of the beginning of the war on the Gaza Strip until now (May 2024), more than 145 journalists have been killed, including 16 female journalists, in addition to 100 to 150 violations recorded in the West Bank, most of which were concentrated in Jerusalem.

The most prominent of these violations was the arrest of female journalists, as 8 female journalists were arrested, four of whom are still in detention. She continues: "These arrests are made without charges, and if there is a charge, it is typically for incitement. Journalists, who are required to report the news, are arrested if they write or republish news on social media sites."

Through her follow-up during her work in the Syndicate, and her field work in coverage from Radio Monte Carlo and Dubai Satellite, Asaad believes that the journalistic shield, which is supposed to protect journalists, especially in dangerous coverage, is the instigator for Israeli soldiers to pursue and target Palestinian journalists.

Asaad said that the union is now preparing casefiles to file international crimes, including those of female journalists. "It is true that until now, justice has not been achieved for our colleague Sherine Abu Aqleh and others, but we believe that this path must be taken to put pressure on the world to punish Israel," she continued.

The prosecution that the Syndicate is preparing for is not the only Palestinian prosecution of Israel. Many media organizations, with their partners or with international institutions, seek to prosecute Israel. MADA Center is one of these institutions, which continues to submit its reports and documentation to all human rights and international institutions. As Ms. Al-Khatib says, the large scale of violations during the recent war against male and

female journalists is a real opportunity to begin prosecuting Israel for its crimes against journalists.

Not only local institutions, but international institutions operating in Palestine also seek this goal through their work on the ground and documenting all crimes committed. Reporters Without Borders is one of these organizations that has worked over the years to follow up on all the issues faced by male and female journalists in Palestine.

Jonathan Dagher, Director of the Middle East Bureau at Reporters Without Borders, says: “Since October 7, we have seen a very violent approach by the Israeli forces to impose a media blackout on what is happening, specifically in the Gaza Strip, by using all methods, most notably extreme violence.

he added:” “Israel today has become the most dangerous country in the world for journalists, compared to the large number of journalists who were killed in a short period.”

On May 24, Reporters Without Borders filed a new complaint with the International Criminal Court regarding war crimes committed against Palestinian journalists in Gaza, requesting an investigation into the crimes against at least nine Palestinian journalists between December 15 and May 20. In addition to more than 100 journalists killed by the Israeli army since October 7 in Gaza. This complaint was preceded by two complaints filed by the organization, the first on October 31 and the second on December 22.

According to Dagher, “Impunity is what ensured Israel could carry out these practices that are not new, but rather an act accumulated over decades of the Israeli occupation.”

“Impunity puts journalists at risk, not only in Palestine, but throughout the world.

Those who kill journalists are attacking people's right to information, something that is even more important during times of conflict. These perpetrators must be held accountable, and Reporters Without Borders will continue its efforts to achieve this, in solidarity with journalists in Gaza.

Antoine Bernard

Director of Advocacy and Assistance at Reporters Without Borders

The investigation into violations against female journalists and Israel's impunity over many years was summarized by journalist and professor Widad Barghouthi. "Israel has never differentiated between male and female journalists. Every media person with a pen, phone, or camera is targeted. Israeli soldiers do not distinguish based on gender. International bodies, including the United Nations, have been unable to impose any sanctions on it," she stated.

Journalist Barghouthi recounts a harrowing incident during the first Intifada (1987-1993) when soldiers assaulted her after storming her house, striking her on the head with a soldier's helmet, causing a brain fracture and paralysis of half of her face. Despite this, the head of the Journalists' Syndicate blamed her for not showing her press card. In response, she asserted that soldiers showed her no consideration regardless. He agreed with her, recounting his own experience where a soldier disregarded his press card. Since then, the situation has not improved. Palestinian journalists, regardless of gender, face ongoing challenges under occupation, despite international laws guaranteeing their respect and rights in their profession.