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Attacks on the Press in 2012 - Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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Key Developments

- In Gaza conflict, Israeli airstrikes target journalists and media buildings.
- Palestinian Authority's record worsens: Censorship, assaults, detentions reported.

During eight days of fighting with Hamas forces in November, Israel launched airstrikes that targeted two buildings in Gaza housing local and international news outlets, injuring at least nine journalists. Separate missile attacks killed at least two other journalists. Israeli officials broadly asserted that the individuals and news facilities had connections to terrorist activities but disclosed no substantiation for the allegations. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not respond to a written request from CPJ seeking information supporting Israel's claims. Israel's press freedom record suffered in other respects, with lawmakers pushing a bill to dramatically increase fines for alleged libel and impose requirements that news media publish responses from plaintiffs. The bill was pending in late year. Israeli forces continued sporadic attacks on Palestinian journalists covering anti-settlement demonstrations in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In one case, captured Israeli soldiers beating two Palestinian journalists wearing gear marked "press" at an August demonstration in the town of Kafr Qaddum. In February, Israeli authorities raided two Palestinian television stations and confiscated the outlets' equipment, citing alleged frequency violations. One, Wattan TV, had been funded by U.S. government agencies, prompting the U.S. State Department to join CPJ's calls for the equipment's return. Press freedom deteriorated in the West Bank as well. In April, the Palestinian Authority blocked several websites seen as critical of President Mahmoud Abbas, while detaining two journalists who had covered allegations of official corruption. PA security forces assaulted several journalists covering anti-government protests in July. In the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, assaults and threats against critical journalists continued, and self-censorship prevailed.

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Imprisoned on December 1: 3

Israel was holding two journalists without charge, one of them since 2011, according to CPJ's annual worldwide census of imprisoned journalists.

Killed in 2012: 2

Hussam Salama and Mahmoud al-Kumi, cameramen for the Hamas-run television station Al-Aqsa, were killed in November when an Israeli missile hit their car in the Al-Shifaa neighborhood of central Gaza, the station and other news organizations said. Al-Kumi and Salama had just completed an assignment at Al-Shifaa Hospital.

Shekels fine: 300,000

If the Knesset approves a proposed amendment to the 1965 Defamation Act, fines for libel would increase six-fold, from 50,000 shekels (US\$12,987) to 300,000 shekels (US\$77,936). Plaintiffs could still seek damages that would be separate from the fines.

Other aspects of the proposal:

Responses: News outlets would have to publish a plaintiff's full response to allegedly defamatory material. The plaintiff would not be required to prove that he or she had been harmed. The measure did not address whether the plaintiff would have to prove the material was false.

Other fines: Courts could impose fines up to 1.5 million shekels (US\$400,000) if a complainant was not given an opportunity to respond.

Digital media: The bill would extend fines and requirements to bloggers and users of social media.

Soldiers in raid: 30

About 30 Israeli soldiers raided the offices of Wattan TV, a private news broadcaster, and confiscated the station's transmitters, computers, and other equipment, including a news archive covering the previous 10 years. CPJ and the U.S. State Department called for the government to return the equipment.

Timeline of a station in the cross-hairs:

February 29: Israeli soldiers carry out a predawn raid on Wattan TV offices in the West Bank, confiscate equipment and archival material.

April 24: Muammar Orabi, head of Wattan TV, asks the U.S. government to urge the Israelis to return the equipment, which was largely U.S. government-funded.

May 8: CPJ writes to Israeli Ministry of Communications to press for the return of Wattan TV's equipment.

July 5: CPJ writes to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to push the Israelis to return the confiscated equipment.

August 7: The State Department pledges to assist.

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