

THE DEATH OF SHIREEN ABU AKLEH: UNANSWERED BUT UNFORGOTTEN

By Maha Ayub

On the morning of May 11, 2022, 51-year-old Shireen Abu Akleh arrived in the Jenin Refugee Camp, located in the northern West Bank, to cover an Israeli raid. Wearing a helmet and blue vest with the letters “PRESS” written across her chest, she received the green-light from Israeli soldiers surrounding a Palestinian home to proceed. Suddenly, there were three shots fired from behind, the third one hitting her skull and killing her instantly.

Abu Akleh’s immeasurable impact on Palestine made her death jarring. A native to Jerusalem, Abu Akleh felt a calling to journalism, shifting from her original studies in architecture to pursue journalism at Yarmouk University in Jordan. Upon graduating, the young journalist first worked at *Radio Monte Carlo* and *Voice of Palestine* before joining the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

In 1997, Abu Akleh became one of *Al Jazeera*’s first field reporters, and her extensive coverage soon made her synonymous with

the TV network. She gained fame for covering the Second Intifada and was the first Arab journalist allowed in the Israeli Shikma Prison in 2005. She became the world’s window into Palestine and the broader Middle East, reporting on conflicts ranging from the Gaza War to the 2006 Lebanon War. Shireen Abu Akleh’s friends remember her as a brave journalist and a source of hope for those in the Occupied West Bank.

A journalist who has worked alongside Abu Akleh reflected on her legacy: “I remember when I saw her in her press vest, I had this idea of that vest as her armor. It was a metaphor to me to see her dressed like that, like the sort of fairytale you’d tell kids. When I heard bombs going off, when parents cried over children lost to war, she was always there. It didn’t matter how scary it was; she was there, always.”

The unanswered questions regarding the circumstances of her death leave many frustrated: was this a targeted attack? Who fired the bullet? B’Tselem, a non-profit organization, reported that Palestinian gunfire could

PC: Al Jazeera Media Network from Wikimedia Commons



not have killed the journalist.¹ Investigations by Israel, Palestine, and the U.S. Security Coordinator have yet to draw a definitive conclusion, as the bullet was damaged to a degree that prohibited complete analysis. Based on their reports, it is believed that Israeli gunfire killed Abu Akleh, though her death was likely not caused by a targeted attack, but rather the tragic result of intense firing between Israeli Forces and Palestinian Islamic Jihadists.²

But to Abu Akleh's family, these answers are not enough. After meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and members of Congress, they requested a visit with President Joe Biden to no avail.³ Lina Abu Akleh, niece to the late journalist, released a statement on July 26, in which she highlighted President Biden's responsibility to thoroughly investigate the death of an American citizen.

"If we allow Shireen's killing to be swept under the rug, we send a message that the lives of U.S. citizens abroad don't matter, that the lives of Palestinians living under Israeli

occupation don't matter, and that the most courageous journalists in the world, those who cover the human impact of armed conflict and violence, are expendable," she tweeted.⁴

Today, over 20 U.S. senators and 50 representatives have called on the Biden administration to conduct an independent investigation of Shireen Abu Akleh's death in hopes of finding answers.

After Israeli Forces' outrageous attack on Abu Akleh's funeral procession in May, both Israel and the U.S. are under pressure to provide a conclusive answer on the journalist's killing.

Despite the tragedy that led to her martyrdom, her courage and compassion for journalism and the world live on. Abu Akleh continues to be a voice for Palestine, even in death.

"I chose journalism to be close to the people," she once said. "It might not be easy to change the reality, but at least I could bring their voice to the world."⁵

