

A high-value target for Israeli army

Truth dies with journalists in Gaza

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EXCLUSIVE OPINION

Why would a commander order a targeted airstrike on a certain individual or class of individuals during a war? After all, rockets and artillery munitions aren't cheap — far from it! Producing one used in modern combats costs at least a thousand US dollars and usually even more. So, you have to make every munition count. There are going to be all kinds of accountability later on, too, whether they be on domestic or international political and moral grounds. So, a commander's probably not going to order the killing of any one target in particular for anything less than convincing reasons.

Let's make our commander's work easier. Assume that he's not going to be questioned for ordering a strike on any ground other than how much it furthered their war effort and brought them closer to victory in any capacity. That presumption would untie his hands to even target children if he wanted to — as abhorrent as that is in real-world circumstances — but he still has to answer how killing a child would have helped. By just playing the devil's advocate, I can imagine some commanders saying that a particular child was wearing a bomb, but even that argument loses its steam if the commander has mass murdered a large group of children. So, targeting a whole group of individuals needs sounder, reasonably generalizable reasons than targeting one or two individuals. Even then, accusing certain groups of individuals of working for or against a country during a war doesn't hold well. Babies, children, women, the disabled and the elderly, embassy staffers, employees of UN and various relief groups, nurses, doctors, and members of the press are some such groups that readily come to mind — bonus point if they are a citizen of other countries that are in no shape or form a party to that war.



Palestinian journalists attend a gathering in Nablus city, West Bank, to denounce the killing of Palestinian journalists in early October in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza City.
ZAIN JAAFAR/AFP

Why are war correspondents protected?

Even though it is common knowledge that during wartime, war correspondents enjoy some kind of "immunity" — which we will show is not an accurate description — as evidenced by their easily identifiable, obligatory protective attire, many of our readers probably do not really know why that is the case. To be fair, the reason is not explicitly stated in any legal document. However, the fact that almost every country in the world has recognized the necessity of giving war correspondents a special status must amount to something. Legal scholars, attorneys, and special interest groups would argue that no journalist in their right mind will seek the most dangerous places a modern human being can be if it was up to them. They are there to fulfill their job duties. Hopefully, they get paid handsomely for their sacrifices, as well. As such, it's merely in their job descriptions to be there and report the news of the war from the ground. That may well be true, but it would not merit their presence by itself. After all, many organizations would probably love to have their employees in war zones to perform non-hostile duties and generate profit. That doesn't mean that the warring parties would or should give them free, protected access. There must be more to it than simply meeting job requirements. Interestingly, just showing your journalist badge won't get you anywhere and everywhere in peace time, either. Generally, members of the press are allowed wherever the public is allowed, but private, military, and crime scene grounds are off-limits. There certainly is a vetting process for news agencies that wish to work in another country. Some countries re-

quire individuals who wish to work in the media, in particular journalists, to obtain official permission before commencing their activities. But once you have the permission, you are again treated as a foreign national, enjoy the same rights, and are allowed wherever the public is allowed. The more common and acceptable argument that follows from the "they're-just-there-to-do-their-job" argument is that war correspondents are not working for or against any warring party and do not intend harm on anyone, especially soldiers as that would put the correspondents themselves in danger. While true, this doesn't give us the whole picture. That same flaw can be found in this argument: there are many individuals, national or foreign, that do not intend any harm and are working for any warring party, but they don't have the privilege of getting special treatment — however minor that privilege currently is for war correspondents, as you will see. So, why did world leaders agree that journalists should be protected during wars, considering that it may someday be the turn for their country to be engaged in a war? I believe that has to do with what journalists should stand for, not necessarily for what any one journalist or news organization stands for. To be sure, journalists are humans, not saints, and heads of media corporations often think more about how reports do to increase sales and ratings. But in this case, a few rotten apples do not spoil the bunch. Quite the contrary, only one or two good, honest journalists are enough to redeem the whole line of work. One need not look at it in such black and white terms, though. Representing the distribution of honest and dishon-

est workers of any profession on a graph generally results in a bell-shaped curve: most would fall in the middle and be considered rather honest. So, what do journalists conceptually and ideally stand for? The clue is not found in the denotation of being a 'journalist'; rather, it is found in the connotation that journalism has with holding state or non-state figures and agencies accountable, and rendering them transparent. For one thing, journalists strive to bring transparency into issues of public interest. If that is not achieved by a direct, if sometimes driving line of questioning, journalists will hopefully turn to investigative journalism to uncover the truth that was not willingly made public. The world 'public' turns up time and time again in discussing matters of journalism — as it just did in the span of the last two sentences — because even though journalists are paid by news agencies or news outlets to report facts and figures, they are essentially working for the service industry. The people have a need to know the latest and/or most impactful factual information for various reasons, and journalists meet that need. If by any chance, the public loses interest in knowing these pieces of information, it's hard to imagine that the press will still linger, even with state funding. Not to mention that states benefit heavily from outsourcing the more mundane parts of their intelligence gathering to local and international news agencies. Combined, the need for transparency and availability of information is among the principal reasons why there's a consensus that we need the press. Holding organizations and people in power accountable is another goal of

journalism. It's worth noting that journalists do not always get the chance to be the one to do it. Rather, they are most likely the first or one of the first links in that chain. Even by disseminating a piece of information matter-of-factly, they can set off a chain of events that leads to a measure being taken in the interest of the public or state(s). That's why we need journalists on battlefields and war zones. They are the places most susceptible to breaches of international laws — humanitarian or otherwise. Long gone are the times when history was exclusively "written by victors". Nowadays, with the advances in technology, every citizen with a mobile phone can effectively play the role of a journalist and undermine the narratives of the supposed victors by increasing transparency that hopefully will result in increased accountability. But since journalists are professionally trained to gate-keep against fake or unverifiable news and more connected to means of general broadcasting, their continued presence is crucial.

The number of media workers killed by Israel in approximately three months exceeds the total count of journalists (69) killed throughout the entire six-year span of World War II.