

AMMAN ACADEMY MODEL UNITED NATIONS 2026



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United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC)



Protecting Journalists and Freedom of Expression in Armed Conflict Zones Amid Digital Surveillance and Information Warfare

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AAMUN'26



Dear Delegates,

Regarding the use of ChatGPT in AAMUN'26, we will allow its usage as a **research engine only**. Please be aware that it was last updated on **June 2024**. Therefore, there is a high probability that it will provide you with incorrect information about the topic. If used, we encourage you to fact-check the information to prevent any issues throughout the debate.



COMMITTEE

As the UN Human Rights Council, we express our deepest concerns over the growing number of threats to journalists and media workers who report from war zones. An unprecedented number of journalists have lost their lives due to deliberate attacks, and an equally alarming number have fallen victim to digital harassment and surveillance through commercially available spyware, state-sponsored disinformation networks, and information warfare. Such practices are tantamount to violations of the right to life, the right to freedom of speech, and the right to privacy, as enshrined in international law, and a violation of the public's right to receive credible information about armed conflicts. We, the UN Human Rights Council, recognize that the protection of journalists is intrinsically linked to the protection of civilians, since the loss of independent reporting reduces the number of potential deterrents to violations of international law. The UNHRC will seek to hold perpetrators of attacks on journalists accountable, to secure additional legal and technical measures to protect journalists from digital surveillance, and to pursue international action to combat information manipulation during wartime.



INTRODUCTION

Journalists play a vital role in armed conflicts by documenting violence, reporting humanitarian crises, and providing the public with reliable information about events on the ground. However, reporting from conflict zones places journalists at serious risk of killing, injury, kidnapping, detention, intimidation, and restrictions on their work. Protecting journalists is therefore essential not only for their safety, but also for ensuring that people can access information about humanitarian crises and human rights violations. (UNESCO, 2025)

As technology has developed, the threats facing journalists have expanded beyond physical violence. Digital surveillance can allow governments or other actors to monitor communications, track locations, hack devices, or access confidential information and sources. Newer technologies, including spyware, biometric systems, and AI-driven monitoring, have created additional ways to target journalists and media workers. These practices can threaten journalists' privacy and discourage them from reporting freely. (UNESCO, 2025)

At the same time, modern conflicts are increasingly fought through **information warfare**, in which governments, armed groups, or other actors use propaganda, disinformation, manipulated images and videos, and online campaigns to influence public opinion and spread false narratives. This can make it harder for the public to distinguish reliable information from manipulation and can place journalists at greater risk when their reporting challenges these narratives. Digital platforms can further amplify information distortion and make independent journalism harder to reach. (UNESCO, 2025)

The scale of these threats has become increasingly serious. UNESCO reported **that** 186 journalists were killed while covering wars and conflict zones between 2022 and 2025, a 67% increase compared with the previous period. At the same time, self-censorship among journalists increased significantly, showing how threats can affect not only journalists' safety but also their willingness and ability to report freely. (UNESCO, 2025)

These challenges create a difficult balance between national security and freedom of expression. States have legitimate responsibilities to protect national security, but security measures should not become a justification for unlawful surveillance, censorship, or intimidation. For the UNHRC, the issue therefore concerns not only the physical safety of journalists, but also their privacy, protection of sources, freedom of expression, and ability to provide reliable information during armed conflicts.

Delegates therefore need to consider how the international community can protect journalists and their sources in armed conflict zones, prevent the misuse of digital surveillance and information warfare, and preserve freedom of expression and access to reliable information. Delegates are required to draft a resolution that strengthens journalist protection, limits the misuse of surveillance and information warfare, and ensures that journalists can report safely and independently while respecting legitimate national-security concerns.

TIMELINE

1949: Geneva Conventions establish civilian protections;

The Fourth Geneva Convention affirms that civilians, including journalists working in conflict zones, are entitled to protection from direct attack, forming the foundational legal basis for the protection of media workers during armed conflict.

1977: Additional Protocol I explicitly protects journalists;

Article 79 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions explicitly recognizes journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict as civilians entitled to protection, provided they take no action adversely affecting their civilian status.

2006: UN Security Council Resolution 1738;

The UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1738, condemning attacks against journalists, media professionals, and associated personnel in armed conflict and reaffirming that they must be treated as civilians under international humanitarian law.

2021: The Pegasus Project investigation;

A collaborative investigation led by Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International's Security Lab, involving seventeen media partners, reveals that NSO Group's Pegasus spyware was used to target journalists, activists, lawyers, and politicians in more than fifty countries, prompting official investigations in France, India, Hungary, and elsewhere, and the formation of a European Parliament committee on the impact of spyware on democracy.

2023–2025: Escalating conflicts drive record journalist deaths;

The wars in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine become the deadliest conflicts for media workers in decades. The Committee to Protect Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists both report roughly 126 to 129 journalists and media workers killed globally in 2025 alone, with the majority of deaths linked to the war in Gaza and further significant losses among journalists covering Sudan's civil war and the Russia-Ukraine front lines.

December 2024: Amnesty International exposes surveillance in Serbia;

Amnesty International publishes "A Digital Prison," documenting the systematic use of mobile forensic tools and multiple spyware products, including Pegasus, against journalists and civil society members in Serbia, part of a broader pattern of digital surveillance used against independent media in the Balkans.

February–March 2025: Renewed Pegasus targeting of investigative journalists;

Amnesty International's Security Lab documents new cases in which two journalists from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Serbia were targeted with Pegasus spyware while investigating corruption and state-linked cases, underscoring the continued unlawful use of commercial spyware against reporters despite years of prior public exposure.

August–October 2025: Deliberate strikes on journalists in Gaza and Ukraine;



An Israeli strike kills Al Jazeera correspondent Anas al-Sharif and five colleagues at a tent used by journalists near Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. In Ukraine, French photojournalist Antoni Lallican is killed by a Russian first-person-view drone strike while reporting in Donetsk, and Ukrainian broadcast journalists Olena Hramova and Yevhen Karmazin are killed in a Russian drone strike on their vehicle near the front line in Kramatorsk.

December 2025: Year-end press freedom reports document the toll;

Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists, and the Committee to Protect Journalists each release year-end reports confirming 2025 as one of the deadliest years on record for journalists, with press freedom organizations describing a growing pattern of deliberate targeting rather than incidental harm, alongside a near-record number of journalists imprisoned worldwide and rising incidents of online harassment.

April–May 2026: IFJ maps the global surveillance of journalists;

The International Federation of Journalists publishes "Global Surveillance of Journalists: A Technical Mapping of Tools, Tactics and Threats," documenting the convergence of state intelligence capabilities and commercial spyware products including Pegasus, Predator, and Graphite, and warning that these zero-click tools are increasingly deployed against journalists with little oversight or legal recourse.

May 2026: A new wave of spyware targeting in Serbia;

Citizen Lab and the SHARE Foundation confirm the first documented Pegasus infection of 2026, alongside a related spyware variant, in what researchers describe as the largest documented wave of digital surveillance targeting activists and journalists in Serbia to date, coinciding with mass anti-corruption protests.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The protection of journalists in armed conflict draws on two areas of international law that face mounting pressures, namely, international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The former provides that journalists are protected persons who may not be directly attacked, unless they directly participate in hostilities. The latter affords journalists freedom of expression and freedom of information, including during states of emergency and armed conflict. Both areas of law are increasingly challenged by deliberate physical targeting and the rapid rise of digital surveillance and disinformation capacities.

Physical targeting of journalists in active conflict, such as in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine has resulted in significantly increased risks to journalists. Freedom of Press

Foundation reports that an increasing proportion of journalist deaths in these regions are a result of deliberate attack rather than incidental harm. This is a challenge both in terms of evidence gathering, due to the restricted access to conflict areas, and in terms of international law, as in many of these cases, no clear determination has been made as to whether the targeted individual was a journalist operating in their professional capacity or an agent of a warring state.

Journalists are also subject to growing digital surveillance. Commercial spyware, developed by private companies such as NSO Group, Cyrox, and Intellexa has been found installed on the devices of investigative and conflict journalists, providing unauthorized access to their messages and tracking their physical location. Such surveillance can endanger lives if the private location or contact details of a journalist is obtained, particularly in active conflict areas. The sale of such technology has proliferated significantly, often without clear limitations on the capabilities or targets of surveillance, well beyond the stated aim of countering terrorism and international organized crime.

Disinformation campaigns, often using social media capacity, can challenge the ability of journalists to report accurately on a conflict, particularly if state or non-state actors utilize disinformation, fake content, and coordinated online abuse to discredit journalists and obscure evidence of atrocities committed by their allies. This can endanger both individual journalists through direct threats and the public at large, by challenging the credibility of journalists reporting on the conflict entirely. Such a confluence of pressures requires a multifaceted response, one that international law and accountability mechanisms have so far struggled to manage.



PARTIES INVOLVED

Israel: Israel's military actions in Gaza have resulted in more deaths of journalists than any other conflict tracked by international press freedom organizations in recent years. Monitoring groups have attributed a significant portion of 2025's global tally of journalists murdered to Israeli attacks. Israel denies allegations of deliberately targeting journalists and has raised questions about the affiliations of those labeled as journalists by monitoring groups.

Russia and Ukraine: The Russia-Ukraine war has resulted in journalists on both sides of the front lines being casualties of attacks. Press freedom groups have documented dozens of attacks on journalists and dozens of confirmed murders committed by Russian drone and missile strikes on journalists.

Sudan: Since the beginning of the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in April 2023, journalists covering the civil war have been deliberately targeted by both warring factions, resulting in dozens of deaths and hundreds of press freedom violations, including detentions and enforced disappearances.

Serbia: Serbia has been accused by Amnesty International, Citizen Lab, and other digital rights groups of routinely employing commercial surveillance technology, including Pegasus and other domestic security software, to target investigative journalists and civil society.

NSO Group and the commercial spyware industry: Private companies that create and sell surveillance technology like Pegasus, Predator, and Graphite have a controversial and central role in this crisis because their products have repeatedly been found on the devices of journalists, despite claims that only governments can purchase them for use against terrorists and other serious threats.

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression: The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression has repeatedly raised concerns about the use of surveillance technology against journalists and recommended that a moratorium on the sale and transfer of such technology be imposed until human rights safeguards are in place.

Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, and the International Federation of Journalists: These press freedom groups are the primary watchdogs for tracking down and documenting the deaths and disappearances of journalists, as well as the use of surveillance technology against them. Their annual reports are the foundation for much of the debate about this crisis at the international level.

European Union and United States: The EU and the U.S. have both acted to restrict the commercial surveillance technology sector, including imposing sanctions on firms that sell such technology and restricting its use by governments. Both have seen parliaments and congresses investigate the commercial spyware industry's misuse of journalists and civil society more broadly.

Previous Efforts

1. International Legal Frameworks

The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols and UN Security Council Resolution 1738 confirm that journalists in areas of conflict are entitled to civilian protections under international humanitarian law. Despite international condemnation, attacks on journalists in area of conflict are not consistently prosecuted by states.

2. Independent Documentation and Reporting

Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, and International Federation of Journalists all maintain up-to-date, comprehensive databases of targeted killings of journalists and attacks on media workers. Their annual reports have served as the standard for international diplomatic and public pressure on states and armed groups responsible for attacks on media workers.

3. Investigations into Spyware Abuse

The 2021 Pegasus Project investigation by Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International's Security Lab with the participation of seventeen media outlets not only revealed the scale of the abuse of state-sponsored spyware but also triggered a number of official investigations in several states, a European Parliament inquiry, and trade and diplomatic sanctions against the NSO Group by several governments. Amnesty International and Citizen Lab investigations into the abuse of

spyware against journalists in Serbia, India, and elsewhere have since continued.

4. Regulatory and Sanctions Measures

The United States has imposed export and trade restrictions and sanctions against NSO Group and other spyware companies on national human rights and national security grounds and formally sanctioned members of the Intellexa spyware consortium. The EU has initiated formal inquiries into the potential abuse of spyware by member states against journalists and civil society, but a binding EU-level framework regulating the trade and use of such technology has yet to be adopted.

5. Advocacy for Spyware Moratorium and Safer Reporting Conditions

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and a number of coalitions of civil society organizations have called for a global moratorium on the sale and transfer of commercial spyware until comprehensive human rights safeguards are in place and for safer accreditation, evacuation, and protection procedures for journalists in areas of conflict. The implementation of these recommendations remains incomplete, and press freedom organizations continue to document attacks on journalists and media workers both in physical and digital environments.



Glossary

International Humanitarian Law (IHL): “The body of international law, including the Geneva Conventions, that regulates the conduct of armed conflict and protects persons, including civilians and journalists, who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities.”

Spyware: “Software designed to covertly infiltrate a device to monitor its user, extract data such as messages and location information, and, in advanced cases, remotely activate a device's camera or microphone without the user's knowledge.”

Zero-Click Attack: “A method of installing spyware or malware on a device that requires no action from the target, such as clicking a link, making detection and prevention especially difficult.”

Information Warfare: “The use of coordinated disinformation, propaganda, and manipulated or fabricated content by state or non-state actors to influence public perception, discredit adversaries, or obscure facts during conflict.”

Disinformation: “False or misleading information deliberately created and spread to deceive an audience, often distinguished from misinformation, which is spread without intent to deceive.”

Impunity: “The failure to bring perpetrators of human rights violations, including attacks on journalists, to justice, often cited by press freedom organizations as a key driver of continued violence against media workers.”