

Palestine Beyond Borders: A Global Assault on Civic Rights

Written by Alessia Cigna, Asiya Shakeel and Martina Onesto

Revised by Fiona Tepshi

The right to freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹ (UDHR), is the cornerstone of democratic societies. It aims to ensure accountability, foster justice, and preserve human dignity. However, in the human history, one can find multiple examples of when this fundamental right was under attack - a very recent example being the Israel-Palestine conflict². What began as a territorial conflict has metastasized into a transnational crisis, where freedom of speech, protest, and media are being systematically suppressed. This is not just a regional tragedy - it is a global human rights emergency.

So, why should we be worried?

The Israel-Palestine conflict has evolved into a transnational repression, targeting journalists, protesters, and advocates far beyond Gaza and the West Bank. A recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression³ highlights how this assault on civic rights manifests in three critical ways: the silencing of journalists and media, the criminalization of protests worldwide, and the manipulation of digital platforms to distort narratives and suppress dissent. Due to some legal pitfalls, it is hard to regulate these three issues, which will be highlighted below.

The Silencing of Journalists and Media

Since October 2023, over 128 journalists have been killed⁴ in Gaza, making this the deadliest conflict for media workers in modern history. These killings, alongside the systematic destruction of media infrastructure and the imposition of communication

¹ 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' (OHCHR2025)
<<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights#%3A~%3Atext%3DArticle%2019%2C-1.%26text%3DEveryone%20shall%20have%20the%20right%2Cother%20media%20of%20his%20choice>> accessed 11 February 2025.

² 'Israel and Palestine: A Year On, the Assault on Freedom of Expression Continues - ARTICLE 19' (ARTICLE 1910 October 2024)
<<https://www.article19.org/resources/israel-and-palestine-a-year-on-the-assault-on-freedom-of-expression-continues/>>.

³ 'Seventy-Ninth Session Agenda Item 71 (B) of the Provisional Agenda* Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: Human Rights Questions, Including Alternative Approaches for Improving the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms Global Threats to Freedom of Expression Arising from the Conflict in Gaza Note by the Secretary-General**'

<<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/247/88/pdf/n2424788.pdf>>.

⁴ n2

blackouts, are not incidental. Eighty percent of Gaza's telecommunications towers have been destroyed⁵, leaving journalists unable to document the atrocities unfolding on the ground. These actions are deliberate, calculated moves to create an information vacuum and shield atrocities from global accountability.

Under international humanitarian law, journalists are civilians and must be protected⁶ from military targeting. Israel's failure to uphold these protections represents a blatant violation of these norms. The lack of independent reporting worsens impunity, as evidence of potential war crimes and crimes against humanity is suppressed. Without documentation, there can be no justice—and without justice, the mechanisms designed to prevent human suffering are rendered meaningless.

Governments and international bodies must act to uphold these legal norms. Without a free press, two fundamental principles of international law - transparency and accountability - cease to exist.

The Criminalization of Protests Worldwide

Beyond the borders of Gaza, the repression of Palestinian voices has taken on a global dimension. Across Europe, protests in solidarity with Palestinians are being banned under the guise of public security. In Amsterdam, over 250⁷ demonstrators were arrested for participating in a banned protest. In the United States, university students have faced suspensions⁸, and riot police have violently dispersed campus encampments. These actions violate the right to peaceful assembly, protected under Article 21⁹ of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Governments have weaponized vague hate speech and anti-terrorism laws to justify these measures. Symbols like the Palestinian flag and phrases such as "From the River to the Sea"

⁵ Adam Rasgon, 'These Workers Are Risking Their Lives to Restore Gaza's Phone Network' *The New York Times* (13 March 2024)

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/13/world/middleeast/gaza-phone-networks.html>>.

⁶ (Icrc.org2025) <<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-79?activeTab>> accessed 11 February 2025.

⁷ '281 Arrested at Banned Protest on Amsterdam Dam Square; Footage of Police Brutality' (*NL Times* 14 November 2024)

<<https://nltimes.nl/2024/11/14/281-arrested-banned-protest-amsterdam-dam-square-footage-p-olice-brutality>> accessed 11 February 2025.

⁸ Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, 'Resistance to Repression and Back Again: The Movement for Palestinian Liberation in US Academia' [2024] Middle East critique 1.

⁹ n1

are being criminalized¹⁰, equating legitimate political advocacy with extremism¹¹. In a specific incident, an Italian beekeeper was fined¹² for having a little sign saying “Stop Bombing Gaza”. These legal frameworks foster a chilling effect, where fear of retaliation silences individuals and movements.

While the global community recognizes that suppressing solidarity with Palestine¹³ sets a dangerous precedent, this issue persists, but why? A primary reason is that different jurisdictions have different understandings of what is right and wrong - especially when it comes to the Israel-Palestine issue - it is very polarizing. In such cases, when we cannot universally criminalize an action, it becomes hard to regulate it transnationally. Hate speech pertaining to Palestinians is protected in some regions and unprotected in others, making this a complex issue.

The Manipulation of Digital Platforms

When it comes to freedom of expression on social media, studies show that pro-Palestinian content is disproportionately removed¹⁴ or shadowbanned, while hate speech targeting Jewish and Muslim communities has surged. On platforms like Meta and X (formerly Twitter), policies lack the nuance to distinguish between harmful speech and legitimate political advocacy, disproportionately silencing marginalized voices¹⁵.

Governments have exploited third-party platforms to spread disinformation, delegitimize Palestinian narratives, and undermine humanitarian organizations. For instance, Israel has accused journalists and UN agencies of colluding with terrorist groups, a claim often

¹⁰ Deborah Cole, ‘German Court Convicts Activist for Leading “from the River to the Sea” Chant’ (*the Guardian* 6 August 2024)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/06/german-court-due-to-rule-on-from-the-river-to-the-sea-case-in-test-of-free-speech>>.

¹¹ ‘Posts That Include “from the River to the Sea” | Oversight Board’ (*The Oversight Board* 17 October 2024) <<https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/bun-86tj0rk5/>>.

¹² Federico Berni, ‘Striscione pro Palestina al Mercato Di Desio, Arrivano I Carabinieri: Multa Di 430 Euro All’apicoltore’ (*Corriere della Sera* 16 October 2024)

<https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/lombardia/24_ottobre_16/striscione-pro-palestina-al-mercato-di-desio-arrivano-i-carabinieri-multa-di-430-euro-all-apicoltore-7c08956e-a16b-4070-a1e7-93b3c5b31x1k.shtml> accessed 11 February 2025.

¹³ ‘New Report Reveals State Led Censorship and Suppression of Palestine Solidarity across Europe’ (*Cage.ngo* 2025)

<<https://www.cage.ngo/articles/new-report-reveals-state-led-censorship-and-suppression-of-palestine-solidarity-across-europe>> accessed 11 February 2025.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, ‘Meta’s Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook’ [2023] Human Rights Watch

<<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>>.

¹⁵ n8

amplified by state-sponsored propaganda¹⁶. These campaigns erode trust in digital platforms and distort global understanding of the conflict.

Since social media platforms are critical tools for documenting human rights abuses, their failures undermine accountability and amplify injustice. If these platforms continue to operate without robust human rights safeguards, they will remain complicit in silencing dissent and perpetuating inequality.

So what now - a call for Justice and Accountability?

The systematic suppression of journalists, protesters, and digital narratives violates international legal standards and sets a dangerous precedent for the repression of civic freedoms everywhere. Accountability mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court's ongoing investigations¹⁷ into potential war crimes in Gaza, must address these violations of freedom of expression and assembly. Governments must protect, not persecute, those who speak out against injustice. This however often becomes a problem, because while freedom of expression is enshrined in the UDHR, it is not an absolute right. States have the leeway to balance this right against their national security, and so where does one draw the line?

Transnational repression¹⁸ cannot be normalized. What happens in Gaza reverberates far beyond its borders. If we remain silent, we risk creating a world where freedom is conditional and justice is selective. We hence raise the question - when our right to protest gets taken away, is it in the name of protecting freedom of expression, or as part of the systemic repression of the voices of the oppressed?

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¹⁶ ‘Pressure, Intimidation, and Censorship: Israeli Journalists Have Faced Growing Repression in the Past Year’ (*Rsf.org* 4 October 2024)
<<https://rsf.org/en/pressure-intimidation-and-censorship-israeli-journalists-have-faced-growing-repression-past-year>>.

¹⁷ Yossi Mekelberg, ‘The ICJ and ICC Put Israel on Notice but Cannot Stop the War’ (*Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank* 30 May 2024)
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¹⁸ n14

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