**Forgotten murder**

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Moments after Washington Post columnist David Ignatius began an interview with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to commemorate World Press Freedom Day, two polite, determined souls, clad in pink T shirts, walked onto the stage, carrying small signs.

The man and woman were intent on reminding Ignatius and Blinken and their large audience about the fates of a publisher and a journalist – one jailed, the other murdered – whom, I suspect, the demonstrators knew would be forgotten by the columnist and the diplomat.

“Excuse us,” the female protester said, “We can’t use this day without calling for the freedom of Julian Assange.”

The other protester shouted the following, as he and his confederate were being hauled away: “Not one word about Shireen Abu Akleh, who was murdered by the Israeli occupation forces in Palestine.”

He was right.

When the interview resumed, Ignatius did not devote a question, let alone acknowledge, the imprisonment of the Wikileaks founder in a British maximum-security jail or veteran Al Jazeera reporter Abu Akleh’s assassination by an Israeli sniper in Jenin on May 11, 2022.

This was not an oversight. It was a choice by the obsequious Ignatius to avoid making his guest uncomfortable by asking him why he had done nothing to hold the Israeli assassin or the government they served to account for the summary execution of the Palestinian-American journalist by Israel.

The awful details of Abu Akleh’s killing are hard to forget. She was wearing a vest with ‘PRESS’ written in big, bold, white letters. She was in Jenin early that May morning with an Al Jazeera television crew to report on yet another Israeli raid into the besieged Palestinian refugee camp. Abu Akleh knew the refugees and they knew her.

As she walked along a narrow alley, there was a short burst of gunfire. Seconds later, Abu Akleh was lying face down, as a frantic, young colleague tried to reach out to her.

A slew of exhaustive investigations by a variety of US and foreign news organisations, including the Washington Post, all arrived at the same conclusion: Abu Akleh had more than likely been slain by an Israeli soldier.

Apparently, Ignatius did not remember any of it. Instead, he asked Blinken about what steps he was taking to secure the release of three white, male journalists – two Americans, and one Russian citizen with a US residency – detained by Moscow and Damascus.

Blinken said, in effect, that he was doing everything in his and the Biden administration’s considerable power to get the two men back to their anxious families.Ignatius thanked and applauded the secretary of state for his efforts. Blinken smiled.

I think Ignatius did not recall Shireen Abu Akleh’s murder or his newspaper’s extensive reporting about it because, despite being an American, she was not considered a bona fide US citizen like the two other reporters whose plights he took time and pains to raise.

Abu Akleh was a Palestinian. And, ultimately, for much of the American press and diplomatic establishment, Palestinians do not matter. They are forgettable.

Clearly, Ignatius and Blinken were also not inclined to offend or criticise a rogue nation they have spent careers defending and protecting even though it has been found responsible for the state-sanctioned hit on an acclaimed American reporter.

So, predictably, Ignatius and Blinken spent much of their chummy talk bashing Russia and Syria and their criminal assault on journalism and journalists. Mentioning Israel’s crimes against journalists was, in this context, verboten, and would have, I suppose, been awkward and unbecoming.

Not only was Abu Akleh forgotten, but so was Israel’s bombing into bits of the building housing Al Jazeera and Associated Press journalists in Gaza in 2021.

Sadly, Ignatius and Blinken are not alone, it appears, in forgetting these outrages and the profound and lethal human consequences of Israel’s wanton actions.

In preparation for this column, I wrote an email to the deans, directors, as well as several professors and journalists affiliated with 26 of the top-tier US journalism schools asking how the programmes intended to mark the anniversary of Abu Akleh’s killing or to honour her.

More than two weeks later, just three administrators have replied to my query.

It is difficult to draw concrete conclusions as to why so many journalists-turned-educators have failed to respond to a short, simple question about the horrific death of a reporter who spent her life and work telling the world the truth about the humanity of Palestinians and the cruelty, violence, and injustices visited upon them for generations by their occupiers.

The charitable explanation may be that they were too busy or prevented by a burdensome bureaucracy from responding. The less charitable explanation is that Abu Akleh had, over time, drifted, conveniently, out of view – if she was remembered at all.

History and my instincts tell me that the latter is closer to the truth. In any event, one college director who did reply wrote that his school had “decided not to hold an event because the semester is over by May”. Still, he assured me that “some of us who teach international journalism do refer to her tragic death and discuss attacks against the press.”

Another offered up the same, limp line. “At this time, we are not,” she wrote, “planning any events … as it’s the time of our graduation and classes are not going to be in session, however, know [sic] that it’s certainly a topic of discussion in our ethics classrooms and other electives.”

The brutal, deliberate murder of an American journalist has been reduced to a “tragic event” and “a topic of discussion”. Good to know.

As far as I can gather, only Columbia University’s Simon and June Li’s Center for Global Journalism organised an event – the screening on May 1 of the important film, The Killing of Shireen Abu Akleh – followed by a “conversation” with the journalists who produced the documentary.

This is what she wrote: “[Shireen’s] legacy is vast – from the countless women and girls across the Middle East whom she inspired over many years, to her relentless body of work bearing witness and telling the stories of those who go unheard. But Abu Akleh’s killing has also raised serious questions about threats to press freedom, and in particular, how the US government protects American journalists and seeks accountability when they are killed.”

Indeed.

Excerpted: ‘Shireen Abu Akleh’s forgotten murder’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com