**Grave injustice**

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The killing of Shireen Abu Akleh left me furious: a wonderful woman journalist is gone; Israel’s response is predictable; and the US has failed to take a principled stand for truth and accountability. Shireen, an American citizen and journalist who for the past 25 years has been reporting from Palestinian lands, was a storyteller who got “under the skin” of events. Where Palestinian officials failed, she succeeded. Bringing life to the stories of Palestinians enduring the hardship of occupation, Shireen’s work threatened the Israelis’ dehumanizing narrative that reduced Palestinians to faceless objects.
Like all good journalists, Shireen and her colleague, Ali Samodi, who was shot in the back, witnessed events and told stories so their audience could understand the unfolding human drama. Israel finds this profoundly—even existentially—threatening. The predictable Israeli response to Shireen’s killing involved their hasbara (propaganda) machinery going into overdrive with a combination of denying, lying, and obfuscating what happened.
The early Israeli response evolved from “looking into the possibility that journalists were injured, possibly by Palestinian gunfire” to “I don’t think we killed her…if we indeed killed her, we’ll take responsibility, but it doesn’t seem to be the case.” This deflection was followed by the Israelis’ claiming that they had offered to conduct a joint investigation with the Palestinians—while even the Israeli press said no such offer had been made. After reading these press reports, the Palestinians responded: “No one approached us and no one offered anything.” An Israeli minister then suggested that the Palestinian refusal was “perhaps to cover up the truth.”
To create further confusion, the Israelis claimed a video showed the direction from which Palestinians may have fired the bullets. Later debunked by an Israeli human rights group, satellite maps proved it impossible that Palestinian gunmen, given their location, fired through walls and around corners to hit Shireen and Ali. Why the relentless Israeli effort to obfuscate? The reasoning is clear from an article in the Israeli press the day after Shireen’s killing written by the Israeli general whose division was responsible for killing 12-year-old Muhammad Al-Durrah in 2000. That killing was captured on camera; the image of a little boy being shielded by his father amidst a hail of bullets became iconic. The general reflects that he erred in immediately accepting responsibility, noting that other “explanations” were eventually posited—including that it was a Palestinian hoax staged to sully the Israeli military’s reputation. His recommendation: wait until “you find evidence that will convince at least the Israeli public, as well as international professional entities.” In other words, look for an explanation just plausible enough to convince or confuse the Israeli public and Israel’s supporters in the international community.
Finally, the frustratingly predictable US response to Shireen’s killing was in evidence at the State Department briefing the day of the killing. The spokesperson began: “We are absolutely heartbroken to learn of the killing of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh… and strongly condemn her killing as we do the killing of journalists around the world…We call for an immediate and thorough and full investigation and full accountability. Investigating attacks on independent media and prosecuting those responsible are of paramount importance.”
That resolve, however, faded under intense questioning by the journalists present. When reporters pointed to instances where Israel exonerated itself or only slapped the wrists of its forces found guilty of atrocities, the spokesperson only reaffirmed the US’s full confidence in Israel’s ability to investigate itself. The US refusal to hold Israel to the same standard as other countries is upsetting, particularly in this case because Shireen is a journalist and a US citizen. After decades of cases of US citizens being killed, arrested without charge, tortured, having properties confiscated, or being denied entry, the US response remains the same: expressions of concern; quietly discussing the matter with the Israelis; then doing nothing.
The result is that Israel operates with impunity and Palestinians are left defenseless. In the case of Palestinian Americans, the message sent is that to the Israelis and to our own government our US citizenship offers no special protection.