

REPORT #1



Between the 2023-24 and 2026 Wars

Journalists' Challenges
Persist Despite
Accumulated
Experience

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Introduction

Fifteen months have passed between two wars—serving as a brief respite for journalists who, in 2023–24, worked to convey the reality on the ground and made significant sacrifices. Today, they are back in the field as the Israeli war on Lebanon has escalated once again since early March 2026.

Journalists—both correspondents and war photographers—from the previous war faced a wide range of challenges that hindered their work and put their lives at risk. Foremost among these was the need to ensure their physical safety, which remains fundamental given the security threats posed by shelling, gunfire, and potentially landmines, making field coverage an almost suicidal task. In addition, the difficulty of accessing reliable information emerged as a major issue, due to chaos, the spread of rumors, and the constraints imposed by wartime conditions.

Maharat Foundation documented these challenges and others during the previous war in a report published in November 2024, titled **“A War Without Red Lines: Threats and Risks Facing Journalists in Lebanon.”** The report shed light on the increasing violations against journalists and the impact of these attacks on their freedom and ability to practice their profession under difficult and complex conditions. It also conveyed firsthand accounts from journalists, detailing the hardships faced by individuals who have come to pay the price for their commitment to reporting the truth.

Today, as media coverage of the war resumes and more than two weeks have passed since its outbreak, the question arises as to the extent to which journalists have benefited from their previous wartime experience in developing methods to enhance their physical protection, facilitate access to information, and secure sources. Have journalists become better prepared, or do the challenges remain—and even exceed—their capacity to overcome them?



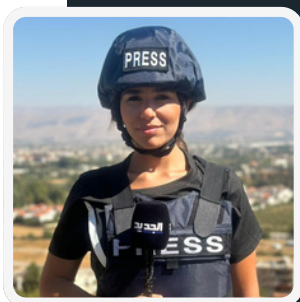
Physical Protection: The Primary Challenge

No concern weighs more heavily on a journalist covering wars and conflicts than ensuring their personal and security safety while on the move. The 2023-24 war witnessed widespread violations against journalists, whether through direct targeting that put their lives at risk, the targeting of transportation, or harassment and threats within neighborhoods and sensitive areas.

Today, as journalists return to cover the current war, the challenge of physical protection appears largely unchanged. This is due to the widening scope of attacks and the failure to spare civilians, including both residents and journalists. In exploring the methods journalists adopt to protect themselves as much as possible and how they have drawn on previous experience to enhance their safety, Al Jadeed correspondent Jacinthe Antar explained to the Maharat Foundation that she consistently prioritizes her physical protection. This includes strictly wearing a helmet and protective vest, keeping a safe distance from targeted buildings, and using wide roads to avoid the risk of falling debris on the team or their vehicle. She also wears thick, specialized shoes that facilitate movement in rough terrain and help prevent slipping.

Jacinthe Antar

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"There is no significant difference in protection measures between the 2023-24 war and 2026. We follow the same protocol," Antar noted. Although she did not undergo formal training in the period between the two wars, the experience she gained from previous coverage has provided her with a deeper understanding of the geography and how to engage with actors on the ground, including military forces. This, in turn, has helped her make more rational decisions and avoid impulsive reactions.

Many journalists we spoke with agreed that this war is more difficult and more intense in terms of security risks. In this context, Al Mayadeen correspondent Khaled Khalil explained that the biggest security challenge in covering the current war is the targeting and its expansion. Even with warnings and advice to stay 300 or 500 meters away from the site of an airstrike, flying shrapnel can reach greater distances. In addition, attacks are sometimes repeated two or more times (double tap strike) after the initial strike, which is why journalists now leave a sufficient time gap before approaching the location.

The second challenge, according to Khalil, is common among journalists and relates to the absence of coverage and internet in some areas. This isolation prevents the journalist from contacting anyone or coordinating with any authority, leaving them at risk because they cannot assess the dangers around them. Although attempts have been made to find solutions by using multiple communication devices with strong signals, these attempts have consistently failed because of heavy jamming. Khalil notes that accumulated experience can help avoid certain mistakes that could lead to security risks. Regarding this accumulation, he said:

Khaled Khalil



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“We participated in several courses between the wars on how to handle targeting and ways to ensure physical protection, as well as courses on first aid, evacuation procedures, and the importance of using protective equipment. Continuous attacks in the past made us anticipate that an expanded war could occur, so we became better prepared. As for guidance from management and the newsroom, it is clear that the assessment of the situation is ultimately up to us, with a strong emphasis in this war that personal safety comes first, even before obtaining information.”

The experience of Layla Khalil, correspondent for Al Ghad, is similar to that of her colleagues in terms of constantly anticipating risks and trying to find appropriate solutions. Khalil, who covered the previous war from the south (due to the difficulty of moving today and the intensity of targeting, the channel limited coverage to the outskirts of the southern suburbs), adopted several measures to provide as much physical protection as possible. These include approaching targeted sites only after a sufficient time has passed, carefully selecting their location, studying available exits, and maintaining constant communication with security agencies to establish an evacuation plan in case of an incursion or road closures.

Layla Khalil

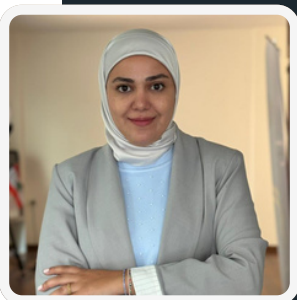


The best solution was to move in journalistic teams rather than individually, with a strong emphasis on avoiding travel at night, and to rely on available equipment such as helmets, vests, and satellite-connected devices in case communications were lost. She added, “I wish I had received specialized training during the past period, specifically in the field of first aid.”

With the outbreak of the war on March 1, the Union of Journalists in Lebanon renewed its calls to journalists, emphasizing the necessity of preserving their personal and physical safety, which is more important than any news report. This includes the strict requirement to wear helmets and basic protective vests while in dangerous areas and during field assignments. Journalistic teams must also stay in contact with their newsrooms, informing them of their locations, and notify the relevant authorities when necessary.

According to journalist and board member Safaa Ayad, the union reminded media organizations through posts that no staff member should be forced to cover areas of active conflict, and that teams should not be put at risk for the sake of a photo, a report, or a live broadcast from targeted locations. Media organizations are also required to provide their journalistic teams with health insurance, life insurance, and coverage for war-related injuries. Regarding past experience, Ayad said:

Safaa Ayad



“The main gaps observed in protection fall on media organizations that do not provide protective equipment or proactive training related to journalist safety and first aid. Lebanon also has a media workforce that relies heavily on freelance journalists, for whom media organizations provide neither protection nor equipment. On the side of the journalist, responsibility also lies in assessing the location and positioning of coverage, communicating any concerns about targeting to the media organization, and having undergone training related to war coverage.”



Access to Information and the Chaos of War

The 2023-24 war highlighted the scale of field challenges and the restrictions that hinder journalists' access to information, limiting their ability to deliver accurate news to the public. The increasing personal hardships, such as displacement, along with limited equipment, infrastructure, and internet access, all exacerbate the problem. These are challenges we aim to highlight through the accounts of journalists who experienced them firsthand.

On this point, journalist Edmond Sassine, who has covered many wars and previous security events, explains:

Edmond Sassine

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Two main issues emerge during wartime. The first is the spread of disinformation and inaccurate information, which circulates rapidly due to the volume and speed of news, creating a major challenge for journalists in verifying facts and providing accurate information. The second is the heightened level of security measures during wars, which often prevents journalists from accessing hot zones for reporting, either because of physical dangers or other restrictions. In addition, increased secrecy around certain issues and matters makes uncovering the truth even more difficult.

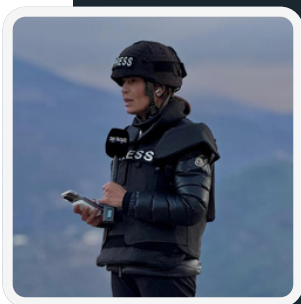
According to Sassine, a practical example that can be applied to the current war regarding the absence of sources is when the Lebanese army withdraws from a border strip to a certain depth, leaving villages empty of residents or municipal authorities, while the Israeli army remains present and cannot be contacted. In such cases, a journalist cannot determine the locations of incursions unless the Israeli side announces them. “We then try to rely partly on what is announced and cross-check it with Hezbollah statements, any available images—even from a distance—or the Lebanese army if it is monitoring,” Sassine explained. He added that when the war intensifies, sources become scarce, and this is where a journalist's experience matters, along with having contacts who can provide information, such as UNIFIL, the “mechanism”, or other colleagues.

Regarding the spread of misinformation, Al Jadeed correspondent Rif Akil told the Maharat Foundation that this issue is reflected in the large number of WhatsApp groups, which include not only professional journalists but also individuals who rely on intuition and share inaccurate or circulating information, causing journalists to make mistakes. In addition, there is often a rush to publish news, such as announcing the targeting of a vehicle or a military center, only to find later that the information was inaccurate.

Rif Akil

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“On the night of the Nabi Sheet landing, for example, even late into the night, I was in contact with the military authorities authorized to provide information, but they did not have precise details about the nature of the landing or even confirmation that it had taken place. Meanwhile, images of helicopters and audio recordings circulated in the groups, claiming coordinates and casualties. Had I relied on this information and published it, I would have caused a professional scandal. The following day, it became clear that the timing of the landing was different from what had been circulated, no injuries or helicopter losses were recorded, and it was revealed that the operation had been exposed during the group’s withdrawal.”



Beyond the issue of absent sources and the spread of disinformation, another challenge that directly affects journalists is the difficulty of moving around, which prevents them from gathering information. Here, Al Araby TV correspondent Mohamad Chebaro explains that journalists are often prevented from moving and observing field events during the war due to several factors, the most prominent of which are warnings and the mass evacuations of entire areas where movement is prohibited. The fact that these areas are empty of residents and eyewitnesses further complicates obtaining accurate information.

Mohamad Chebaro

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Journalists face threats and are sometimes treated as enemies in certain areas, to the point that they are occasionally equated with thieves upon entering a location. In addition, the lack of network coverage and internet access poses an obstacle to communicating with sources and obtaining information quickly. Furthermore, information issued by the relevant state authorities, though more regular than during the previous war, still faces difficulties in direct communication with ministers and officials due to the heavy pressure on them.

“Security rhetoric is sometimes used not only to protect people, but also to control the flow of information and narrow the public sphere,” said Jad Shahrour, spokesperson for the Samir Kassir Foundation, in a statement to BBC News Arabic. He emphasized that “access to information is not a luxury limited to peacetime; it is a fundamental right for every person, guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”



Adhering to Recommendations and Personal Preparedness

Several institutions in Lebanon provide technical support to journalists and organize training programs to prepare them for safe and effective coverage of wars. They also provide recommendations that help journalists understand the best ways to move and act in emergency situations.

On this point, Widad Jarbough, a journalist and senior researcher at the Samir Kassir Foundation, advises journalists to always focus on their safety first, before covering any event, especially during wars and conflicts. Journalists should carefully assess risks before entering any area, know the entry and exit routes, and be familiar with actors on the ground, such as the army, UNIFIL in the south, or security forces present on the ground, as well as benefit from the guidance of emergency teams like the Red Cross.

Journalists are also advised to move in groups rather than individually, and to inform their newsrooms of their planned movements so they remain monitored. It is essential to use protective equipment such as helmets and bulletproof vests, which may reduce risks though they do not eliminate them. Finally, it is important for journalists to receive specialized training before covering conflicts, as this type of reporting requires specific skills and experience.

Regarding newsrooms in media organizations, it is recommended—even “despite limited resources”—that they have a clear, written safety protocol. This should include risk assessments before any assignment, fixed points of contact with reporters, continuous monitoring, and emergency plans for high-risk areas. Media organizations should also evaluate the necessity of each assignment and explore safer alternatives, such as using visual alternatives or other means. Jarbough emphasizes previous reports from the Samir Kassir Foundation, which highlighted that training and coordination should not be limited to journalists alone but must also include newsrooms.

Regarding training, Jarbough says:



“For about seven years, we have been organizing HEFAT (Hostile Environment and First Aid Training) for a large number of journalists in Lebanon and the region. The training is offered twice a year and focuses on both physical and digital safety, aiming to equip journalists with the skills necessary to work in conflict zones. These trainings have also been developed to include newsrooms, in order to improve coordination between media organizations and reporters and to strengthen safety procedures. This training is considered essential and mandatory for any journalist intending to cover conflicts, as it provides the knowledge and skills required to operate in high-risk environments.”

In addition to the Samir Kassir Foundation, the RSF Press Freedom Centre in Beirut works to support journalists during and after wars. Centre coordinator Iman Al-Abed told Maharat that the centre is currently focused on distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) to journalists, including helmets, bulletproof vests, and first aid kits.



“We receive many requests from journalists for this support, and the biggest challenge is being able to cover all the journalists who approach us. We had also planned to organize physical safety training in April.”

Following the previous war, Al-Abed explained that in addition to distributing protective equipment, the centre organized first aid training for journalists working on the ground, offering four sessions with 12 participants each. The centre also provided individual psychological support sessions for journalists.

Returning to the Union of Journalists in Lebanon, it recently announced the creation of a dedicated unit to document any type of assault against journalists while performing their work in the field. According to Safaa Ayad, the purpose of this unit is to record these crimes, document the circumstances of their occurrence, and submit them to the relevant local and international authorities in order to seek accountability and justice for journalists. The unit will also prepare periodic reports and analyze patterns of attacks on journalists, so that the data can be used to defend press freedom and develop preventive policies.

Conclusion

The current situation highlights the urgent need to strengthen journalist protection and ensure their safety during wars, through the enforcement of local laws and international mechanisms, as well as enabling journalists to access information that allows them to perform their role freely. All of this aims to empower journalists to document facts and crimes while preventing them from becoming victims of events rather than witnesses to them.

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