

UN Special Rapporteur: The war in Gaza raises global threats to freedom of expression

ARTICLE 19 welcomes the latest [report](#) of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, presented at the UN today. The report addresses a complex and important issue: the severe and wide-ranging threats to freedom of expression globally arising from Israel's war in Gaza. These include the suppression of protests and dissent related to the conflict, restrictions on advocacy for Palestinian rights, and censorship in the name of fighting terrorism and antisemitism. We urge all relevant actors to carefully consider and implement the report's recommendations and to uphold freedom of expression equally for all who are affected by the war and genocide. Protecting the rights of journalists, allowing protest, and enabling open debate are essential, even on contentious issues.

The Special Rapporteur presented her latest Report today, 17 October 2024, at the 79th Session of the UN General Assembly (Third Committee).

ARTICLE 19 welcomes the Special Rapporteur's decision to address the interconnected violations of freedom of expression both within conflict zones and beyond, which undermine the possibility of a peaceful resolution of this war and hinder justice and accountability.

ARTICLE 19 participated in the consultation organised by the Special Rapporteur during the preparation of the report.

In our submission, we emphasised how the ongoing war in Gaza – perhaps more than any other armed conflict in recent years – has affected the right to protest, the ability to express solidarity with Palestinian rights, the media's capacity to freely cover the conflict and genocide and the protection of minority communities from hate crimes and hate speech in many regions. This is particularly true for the US, Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Key findings of the Special Rapporteur's report

In her report, the Special Rapporteur identifies three distinct challenges to freedom of expression in the context of war in Gaza:

- First, **attacks on journalists and media**, which endanger access to information about the conflict and genocide globally. This aligns with ARTICLE 19's longstanding advocacy for the safety of journalists and, in the context of this war specifically, [calls for Israel to stop targeting journalists](#) and calls to ensure [accountability](#) for violations.
- Second, the **suppression of Palestinian voices and views in a discriminatory and disproportionate manner**, and the undermining of academic and artistic freedom

as well as freedom of expression more generally. Blanket bans on certain types of expression or phrases must be [avoided](#), and educational and cultural institutions must remain vibrant places for balanced dialogue.

- Third, the **blurring of the boundaries between protected political speech and prohibited speech**, including incitement to violence, hostility and discrimination. We welcome in particular the Special Rapporteur's careful and nuanced analysis which dissects the difference between 'hate speech' and support for terrorism. This includes her call to avoid "[b]lanket bans of Palestinian symbols, by linking Palestinians as a people to terrorism or antisemitism." We also appreciate her analysis of overly broad and vague bases for restrictions on the right to expression which fail the test of legal certainty required by international freedom of expression standards.

We have repeatedly emphasised that the protection of the right to protest and engage in political debate on issues of public interest is an essential part of the right to freedom of expression and a functioning democracy. We have also [raised concerns](#) about blanket bans or criminalisation of content, such as the phrase "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," as being disproportionate interferences with the right to freedom of expression.

Violations of human rights and the failure to uphold international legal obligations in the context of war in Gaza are matters of global public interest. ARTICLE 19 calls on States, social media companies, universities and other private entities to uphold freedom of expression equally for all. It is particularly in times of crisis that are marked by a polarised political environment that this fundamental right must be afforded full protection. It is crucial to allow open debate and peaceful protests on these issues without suppression.