

# *U.S. lawmakers urge direct U.S. involvement in Abu Akleh killing probe*

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## **U.S. lawmakers urge direct U.S. involvement in Abu Akleh killing probe**

Washington, June 24 (RHC)-- Twenty-four U.S. senators have called on President Joe Biden to ensure direct involvement from Washington in the investigation of the killing of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli forces.

The latest appeal from U.S. legislators comes after the Biden administration backtracked on Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statement in early June that Washington wants an "independent" investigation into Abu Akleh's killing as she covered a raid in Jenin in the occupied West Bank on May 11.

The U.S. State Department later told Al Jazeera that it maintains its previous stance that Israel should lead the investigation and has repeatedly urged that it be fair and transparent.

Multiple witnesses said Abu Akleh was killed by Israeli gunfire, a narrative that has been enforced by numerous investigations. The Palestinian Authority (PA) and Qatar, where Al Jazeera is based, have also blamed Israel.

In the letter delivered on Thursday, the legislators, all Democrats and two independents who caucus with the party, called for "a thorough and transparent investigation under U.S. auspices" into the killing of Abu Akleh, a Palestinian American who was wearing a "Press" vest when she was shot.

The letter comes as Israeli and Palestinian officials have remained at loggerheads over how the investigation should be conducted. Palestinian authorities reject any Israeli involvement, arguing that it would not be a fair and transparent inquiry. Rights groups have called for an independent investigation.

Israel initially denied its soldier had committed the killing, arguing Abu Akleh could have been killed by a Palestinian gunman. It later backtracked and said it could not rule out the possibility that an Israeli soldier had fired the shot.

Israel's investigation has centred on one soldier, although it has not yet concluded whether anyone will face criminal charges over the killing. It has not released findings following an internal investigation.

In early June, the PA called on Israel to hand over the gun that fired the shot that killed Abu Akleh.

Israel, meanwhile, had previously asked the PA to provide the bullet extracted from the veteran journalist's body so Israel can conduct its own ballistic investigation. The Palestinian Authority rejected the request.

"It is clear that neither of the parties on the ground trust the other to conduct a credible and independent investigation," wrote the US senators, led by Senator Chris Van Hollen, in a letter to Biden, who is due to visit Israel in July.

"We believe the only way to achieve that goal is for the United States to be directly involved," they wrote.

A spokesperson for the White House National Security Council said the US is not conducting an official investigation, but urged both sides to share evidence with each other. "We expect full accountability for those responsible," the spokesperson added. The Israeli embassy in Washington, DC said Israel had conducted a thorough inquiry and "continues to call for an investigation with the United States in an observer role."

Al Jazeera Media Network announced on May 26 that it had assigned a legal team to refer the killing to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. The case was recently handed over to the ICC prosecutor. However, the current status of the investigation remains unclear.

Further casting doubt on Israel's ability to conduct a fair investigation, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz last week reported, citing sources, that no police would be punished for attacking mourners and pallbearers at Abu Akleh's funeral.

On Sunday, hundreds of people attended a memorial event in Ramallah, in the occupied West Bank, to mark 40 days since Abu Akleh's killing, with many describing the outsized influence the Al Jazeera stalwart had in the region, and calling for accountability.

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