

Shireen Abu Akleh was more than a journalist. She was a Palestinian symbol

'I'm afraid, of course, but at a certain point there's no room to be afraid in journalistic work,' the Al Jazeera reporter who was killed in fighting in Jenin once said

Sheren Falah Saab | May 11, 2022 | 3:22 PM | 4

Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who died Wednesday in a clash between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants, was known for her fearless and fair reporting, becoming a symbol of a strong Palestinian woman throughout the Arab world.

“Shireen Abu Akleh, Al Jazeera, Palestine” became a phrase embedded in viewers' minds. She was 51.

In a minute-and-a-half video posted on the channel's website in October, Abu Akleh described her experience as a Palestinian journalist.

“I will never forget the extent of the destruction and the feeling that death was very close. We didn't see our homes, we took our cameras and went from place to place – through the roadblocks and winding paths,” she said.

"Sometimes we stayed to sleep in hospitals, or with people we didn't know, and despite all the dangers we continued with our journalistic work and reporting. This happened in 2002 when we reported from the West Bank under massive fire by the military occupation force – these were the most severe attacks since 1967. In the difficult moments, I overcame my fear.

"I chose journalism to be close to people, and I knew that it wouldn't be easy to change the situation. But at least I managed to bring Palestinians' voices to the world.”

Abu Akleh was born in 1971 in Jerusalem to a Christian Palestinian family with roots in Bethlehem. She studied at the Rosary Sisters' High School in the Beit Hanina neighborhood in East Jerusalem.

She then studied architecture at the Jordan University of Science and Technology, but her love for her land and people led her to switch to journalism. She transferred to Yarmouk University in Jordan, where she

graduated with a degree in print journalism.

She returned to Israel determined to bring out the voice of the Palestinian people. She launched her career with the UN Refugee Agency, the radio service of the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation, a satellite channel in Amman and Monte Carlo Radio.

In 1997 she began with Al Jazeera and was the satellite channel's Palestinian correspondent until her death.

In 2002, during the Israeli army's Operation Defensive Shield during the second intifada, Abu Akleh earned plaudits in the Arab world both for her reporting and her courage as a Palestinian woman steady under fire.

In an Arabic-language interview with her four years ago on NBC, she was asked about being a female journalist courageously covering the Palestinian arena while also breaking stereotypes about Arab women. She was also asked if she was afraid of taking a bullet.

"I'm afraid, of course, but at a certain point there's no room to be afraid in journalistic work," she said. "I try to report from places that are relatively safe, and it's important for me to protect the crew and guarantee their safety, even before I go on the air. It's the most important thing as far as I'm concerned."

Abu Akleh was also famous for not letting fame change her; she ended her life covering a dangerous story at the Jenin refugee camp, whose residents represent the kind of Palestinian voice she wanted the world to hear.

Her brother, who lives abroad, is expected to arrive in Israel on Wednesday evening.

"I have no words, I can't believe it," said a photographer who worked with Abu Akleh for 16 years. "She was the best person you could find, she's my sister. She's not one of those people who take risks, she was always calm."

The Palestinian Foreign Ministry, which called Abu Akleh the "voice of Palestine," added that "Shireen became an icon of the truth. A national hero for those whose voices were silenced by Israel's crimes."

Wahil Salaime, another photographer who worked for years with Abu Akleh, added that "she had a special personality; in her knowledge, in her way of

making stories."

Nir Hasson and Jack Khoury contributed reporting.