

How Israel Mercilessly Targeted and Murdered Disabled People with Special Needs in Gaza

By [Ibtisam Mahdi](#)

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During its war on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli occupation has worsened the plight of those whom life has already wronged. Its random and intentional targeting of civilians did not spare the mentally handicapped.

Gaza – Mohammed Matar, 38, was one such person. He used to make daily visits to the cemetery where his brother had been laid to rest, until he finally joined him in the afterlife after being hit by an Israeli drone missile. It was the 16th day of the war when Mohammed washed his brother's grave with his own blood instead of water.

Mohammed frequently washed and laid flowers on the grave of his older brother Majed, who was shot and killed in the summer of 2007 by occupation forces in the east of Gaza. Majed's martyrdom had struck Mohammed hard, because he was the one who paid him the most attention and care.

A few weeks have already passed since Mohammed, nicknamed "the wild one" was martyred, yet his older brother, Abu Awad, still cannot grasp the idea of losing him.

"He was peaceful and everyone loved him...he went as usual to visit his brother but they killed him," Abu Awad, 45, sighed.

He said that he tried to stop his brother from going to the graveyard in Beit Lahiya, in the north of Gaza, because he was worried about him. But Mohammed kept repeating, "Majed is waiting, he wants water, I must go, I do not want him to be upset with me." He then snuck out of the house without anyone noticing.

A few minutes later, an explosion was heard at a place close by and the media declared that a man was targeted at Beit Lahiya's graveyard. Abu Awad felt at once that his brother was the target; he cried "Mohammed is there.... they killed him."

He rushed to the graveyard to find paramedics gathering up what was left of Mohammed's remains, which were scattered all over the grave of his brother Majed. On the same day, Mohammed became his brother's neighbor, laying in a grave nearby and holding the title of a martyr.

Mohammed, however, was not the first special needs person to be killed by Israeli forces. Around the call of prayer on the dawn of the fourth day of the war, an F-16 jet fired two missiles at the Palestinian Charitable Association for the Disabled, hitting four special needs girls.

In the south of the Strip, in the town of Khaza'a, a broken wheelchair was all that was left of 18-year-old Ghadir Abu Rjeileh. Her decomposed remains were scattered nearby as rescue teams had to wait 10 days before they were able to access the town.

Abu Rjeileh could not leave her besieged town with her family and hundreds of her neighbors during the second day of the land invasion.

Her brother Ghassan was shot in the hand by an Israeli sniper stationed on the roof of a house near the town's entrance, as he pushed her wheelchair.

He revealed that they were attacked as they were getting out of their houses carrying white flags. He was severely injured and his sister was martyred.

"My sister was left sitting alone in the middle of the road in front of tanks. No one knew anything about her until we received a call from someone close to the region saying she was hit by a missile and was ripped to pieces," he said.

With time, the young woman's body started to decompose and to smell, but her wheelchair, her companion ever since she was child, remained standing as a witness to the crime committed against her.

Ghassan and his brother were able to return to the town on the morning of the first day of the three-day truce. Nidal, Ghadir's 30-year-old brother found her dead body laid on the ground. He covered her with a sheet, sat next to her and cried.

In another case, the occupation's army showed no compassion to 20-year-old Ahmed al-Awar, who also suffered from a handicap, as its planes bombed the building where the young man lived. He could not leave because his handicap restricted his movements, so he died a martyr and his body was retrieved from under the rubble.

Shahed al-Qirinawi was a blind seven-year-old child. She was playing with her sister Salwa inside their house in the town of al-Nassirat, in central Gaza. She had no clue the door that was supposed to protect her would fall on her as a result of the pressure emanating from a car that was bombed nearby. She was left with heavy injuries to her fragile body.

Her father Jihad said he left his little girls playing inside the house. Once he left, a municipality car was bombed and the door of their house was ripped off and hit his daughter Shahed. The wall also collapsed, hurting his other daughter Salwa.

The distraught father anxiously lifted Shahed while his older daughter carried Salwa and they all rushed to al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital located 500 meters away, as no ambulances were available. Shahed was later transferred to al-Shifa Hospital's Medical Center due to the severity of her injuries, but she was later announced a martyr, after the many attempts to revive her heart failed.

Awni Matar, the chief of Gaza's General Union for the Disabled denounced the international silence toward the crimes committed by the Israeli occupation in Gaza, urging human rights organizations and international bodies to provide the Palestinian people with international protection and take "real measures to hold those committing crimes against civilians in general, and particularly people with special needs, accountable."

Speaking to *Al-Akhbar*, Matar said the Israeli crimes went beyond all reason and humanity.

[Israel] violated international agreements and charters, including article 11 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the case of danger and humanitarian emergencies, which stipulates that member states should take all possible measures to insure the protection and the well-being of people with special needs who are found at risk, including in the situation of armed conflicts, humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters.

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