

Remembering Mohammed Bhar

Mohammed Bhar was a **24-year-old Palestinian man from Shuja'iyya**, a densely populated district of **Gaza City**. He was born with **Down syndrome** and lived with **autism**, conditions that shaped both his dependence on his family and his gentle, largely non-verbal demeanor. Friends and neighbors remembered him as a quiet presence who liked to sit by the window watching the street life below, easily frightened by loud sounds and reliant on the reassuring voices of his parents.

In a region where noise, fear, and explosions are constants, Mohammed's silence was his refuge - and his parents' responsibility. They lived their lives protecting him from the world's cruelty. He was not political; he was not a fighter. He was simply a human being who needed care and kindness - and who, tragically, found neither in the moment of his death.

Circumstances Leading to His Death

On **3 July 2024**, Israeli soldiers entered Shuja'iyya. They came in armor, with rifles and a **military dog from the Oketz Unit**. When they burst into the Bhar apartment, Mohammed froze in fear. He could not understand the shouted commands; he could barely process the chaos around him. Within seconds, the soldiers **unleashed the dog**. Witnesses and his parents recall the animal **tearing into his arm and chest**, the small room echoing with his screams. His mother tried to reach him but was **dragged back by soldiers**, his father **pinned to the wall**. They were then **handcuffed and taken away**, forced from their home as their son bled on the floor.

For days, the parents were detained. When they were finally released, they hurried back through the shattered streets and found what was left of their son: his **body decomposing**, blood pooled into the cracks of the concrete, the stench of death where he had once watched the world through a window. They washed and buried him, unable even to summon official help amid the fighting.

A human life - vulnerable, disabled, dependent - was extinguished and abandoned without record or remorse.

3. The Troubling History of Dogs in the IDF

Mohammed's killing was not a solitary event. It forms part of a **troubling pattern**: the Israeli military's documented use of **dogs to intimidate, injure, and humiliate Palestinians**.

- **B'Tselem's 2015 report, "When the Dogs Bite,"** catalogued cases where Oketz-unit dogs mauled unarmed civilians, including children, during arrest operations. The or-

ganization concluded that the practice amounted to *cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment*.

- **Breaking the Silence**, a group of former Israeli soldiers, has published testimonies describing dogs used to **terrorize detainees**: soldiers ordered to “let them bark in their faces,” or to allow the animals to bite or drag restrained Palestinians.
- **HaMoked** and **Physicians for Human Rights-Israel** have gathered affidavits from detainees who described **dogs brought into interrogation rooms** as instruments of humiliation.
- The **UN Committee Against Torture (CAT)** and **Human Rights Watch** have expressed concern over the use of dogs in these contexts, warning that such methods violate Israel’s obligations under international law.

Some testimonies describe scenes of **degradation** so severe they blur the line between physical and psychological torture: dogs forced to eat or urinate near bound prisoners, or to simulate sexual domination. While not all claims can be independently verified, the **pattern of humiliation and dehumanization** is consistent across years of reporting.

In this light, the attack that killed Mohammed Bhar was not an anomaly but the **grim culmination of an institutional practice** - one that weaponizes the human fear of animals to enforce control and terror.

4. The System of Impunity under Israeli / Military Law

Within the Israeli legal system, **Palestinians have virtually no avenue for justice**. All alleged offenses by soldiers in the occupied territories fall under the jurisdiction of the **IDF’s Military Advocate General (MAG)**, not civilian courts.

The MAG alone decides whether to open an investigation, and almost always declines. According to **Yesh Din’s 2023 statistics**, out of hundreds of Palestinian complaints between 2019 and 2023, **only 0.7 percent** led to indictments. More than **80 percent** were closed without even opening an inquiry.

Palestinian victims cannot file criminal complaints directly; they must rely on Israeli NGOs to petition on their behalf. Travel restrictions, language barriers, and the absence of transparency in the military system make participation nearly impossible. Even civil suits are blocked: amendments to Israel’s **Civil Wrongs Law (2012)** exempt the state from liability for damages occurring in “combat zones.”

This architecture of impunity means that the same institution accused of wrongdoing decides if it will investigate itself. In Mohammed Bhar’s case - as in most others - no investigation was opened, no soldier questioned, no accountability pursued.

5. Implications under International Law

Under **international humanitarian law (IHL)**, **international human-rights law (IHRL)**, and the **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)**, Mohammed Bhar’s killing may constitute **a war crime and a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions**.

a. Geneva Conventions

- **Article 27 & 32 of the Fourth Geneva Convention** guarantee the protection of civilians from violence, intimidation, and degrading treatment.
- **Common Article 3** prohibits “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture.”
- **Article 16** obliges parties to care for the wounded and sick. Leaving a disabled civilian to die from untreated wounds **violates these duties** and qualifies as “**willful killing**” - a grave breach under **Article 147**.

b. Rome Statute (ICC) Articles 8(2)(a)(ii) and (iii) define **willful killing** and **inhuman treatment** as war crimes; Article 8(2)(b)(xxi) prohibits **outrages upon personal dignity**. If proven intentional, the act of unleashing a dog on a non-combatant and denying aid satisfies these elements. Repeated patterns of such acts could meet the threshold for **crimes against humanity** under Articles 7(1)(f) and 7(1)(h).

c. Human-Rights Treaties Israel’s obligations under the **ICCPR**, **CAT**, and the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** further prohibit torture, arbitrary deprivation of life, and discrimination. Mohammed’s disabilities give the case special weight under the CRPD’s Article 10 (right to life) and Article 15 (freedom from torture).

d. Command and State Responsibility Under customary international law and **Article 28 of the Rome Statute**, commanders may be criminally liable if they knew or should have known of abuses and failed to prevent or punish them. Israel, as a state, bears responsibility for wrongful acts and for its failure to investigate.

Taken together, these frameworks leave little doubt that **Mohammed Bhar’s death is an unlawful killing** under international law.

International Reaction

News of Mohammed Bhar’s death rippled through humanitarian and disability-rights circles.

- **Down Syndrome International** released a statement expressing “deep shock and sorrow,” calling the incident “a horrific violation of human dignity and the right to life of a person with disabilities.”
- **Islamic Relief Worldwide** condemned the killing as “heart-breaking” and urged an **independent international investigation**.
- The **UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** referenced the case as emblematic of the acute vulnerability of disabled people in conflict zones.
- Investigations by **The Guardian**, **Le Monde**, and **Haaretz** connected his death to a broader inquiry into the IDF’s use of attack dogs in civilian areas.

Yet, beyond condemnation, **no state or international body has pursued accountability**. The absence of justice reinforces the sense that Palestinian lives - particularly those of the

most vulnerable - remain unprotected by the international order that claims to defend them.

Echoes of the Darkest Chapters

To understand the full moral gravity of Mohammed Bhar's death, one must look beyond Gaza, into the **dark mirror of history**.

The murder of a disabled man left to die recalls humanity's **darkest histories**: the eugenic ideologies that once deemed such lives unworthy, the Nazi *Aktion T4* program that exterminated the disabled, the colonial and institutional cruelty that erased the different.

When a soldier can order a dog to tear into a man who cannot even speak, it revives that same ancient logic of dehumanization - that some lives matter less. History warned us what follows when society accepts that belief.

A Violation of the Sacred: Jewish Moral Law and the Value of Life

The tragedy of Mohammed Bhar also wounds the **moral heart of Judaism itself**, whose teachings on the sanctity of life are among the oldest and most uncompromising in human history. Two foundational principles - *Pikuach Nefesh* and *B'tselem Elohim* - make the circumstances of his death not only a humanitarian outrage but a **profound desecration of Jewish ethical law**.

Pikuach Nefesh - The Duty to Save Life

In Jewish law, *Pikuach Nefesh* holds that **saving a single life overrides nearly every other commandment**. The Talmud teaches: "*Whoever saves one life, it is as though they have saved the entire world.*" Even on Shabbat, when nearly all work is forbidden, a person must break the law to rescue someone in danger. To ignore a wounded person - any person - is to break this sacred duty.

The soldiers who left Mohammed bleeding violated not only international norms but this core commandment of their own religious tradition. Under *Pikuach Nefesh*, they were obligated to give him aid, to preserve his life above all else. To abandon him was not only an act of violence - it was, in Jewish moral language, a **chilul Hashem**, a desecration of God's name.

B'tselem Elohim - In the Image of God

From the opening of Genesis comes the declaration: "*And God created humankind in His image.*" This idea - *B'tselem Elohim* - is the foundation of Jewish ethics and, through it, of modern human-rights law. It affirms that **every human being, regardless of nationality, faith, or disability, carries divine dignity**.

To unleash a dog on a man who could not defend himself was to deny that image, to act as though divine spark existed only within one people and not another. Such thinking is precisely what the prophets condemned. Isaiah's cry - "*Cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice, relieve the oppressed*" - demands recognition of the divine in every life.

The act that killed Mohammed Bhar therefore violated not only humanitarian law but also **the deepest commandments of the Jewish moral tradition**. It betrayed the very faith that insists the preservation of life transcends borders, and that cruelty toward any human being is an affront to the Creator.

The Moral Reckoning

For a people whose own history bears the memory of persecution, the moral imperative could not be clearer. Judaism's greatness lies not in power but in compassion; its holiness is measured not by conquest but by mercy. To invoke security as justification for cruelty is to trade the Torah's ethics for the logic of Pharaoh.

To honor *Pikuach Nefesh* and *B'tselem Elohim* today is to affirm that Mohammed Bhar's life - though Palestinian, disabled, and poor - was sacred. It is to acknowledge that his death was not only a human tragedy but a spiritual failure, a betrayal of the divine image within us all.

Epilogue: Bearing Witness

To **remember Mohammed Bhar** is to refuse the quiet erasure that often follows atrocity. He was not a combatant, not a threat, not even capable of understanding the commands shouted at him. He was a young man with Down syndrome and autism, trapped in an apartment as soldiers and their dog turned his home into a place of terror. He was a person whose life should have been protected, whose vulnerabilities should have summoned compassion, not violence.

His killing strips away every pretense of justification and exposes the raw truth: that cruelty begins where empathy ends, and that the value of law is measured by whether it defends the powerless. His story demands more than pity. It demands that we look directly at the system that allowed it: a regime of occupation that normalizes cruelty, an international order that excuses it, and a collective moral fatigue that allows tragedy to repeat.

What remains is the duty to remember - not as a gesture of sentiment, but as a demand for moral clarity. His death belongs to the record of history not as an anomaly, but as a warning. A society that can look upon the bleeding body of a disabled man and feel nothing has stepped onto the same road that past civilizations traveled toward ruin.

To remember him is to speak his name in defiance of that indifference. **Mohammed Bhar**. A son. A life that mattered. A wound in the conscience of the world.

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