Report:

Launch Meeting of the UK-Palestine Mental Health Network

The Guild of Psychotherapists, London, on the 2nd April 2014 Sixty people present

Orientation

1. The nature of the problem and its relationship to mental health

The meeting heard how Israel targets the psychological well-being of the Palestinians. One speaker described its aim as being to reduce them to the point where they have to be permanently concerned only about their survival. Its policies encourage despair, desperation and emigration. It was noted that these policies are not only employed against the inhabitants of the Occupied Territories, but are also used against non-Jewish citizens of Israel itself. We were reminded of the living conditions in the refugee camps, within and beyond the borders of Palestine. These circumstances call for the organised expression of solidarity by British-based mental health workers.

2. Mental Health Workers living and working in conditions of intolerable stress

Those Palestinians who work to support the community by providing mental health services themselves endure in the same conditions and live under the same pressures as those for whom they provide help. The Network aspires to find ways to sustain our Palestinian colleagues through establishing relationships based on equality and mutual respect, and by committing ourselves to raising awareness of their situation amongst the British public - and the mental health community in particular.

3. Britain's responsibility, and working to change British attitudes

The Network begins with a recognition of the grave historical responsibility carried by Britain for endorsing Zionist aspirations in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and for continuing to support a utopian project whose implementation has, inevitably, resulted in the dispossession and marginalisation of the Palestinian people. Western support has always been crucial to the progress of a racially-defined Israeli State. Therefore a primary objective of the Network has to be to challenge, as effectively as possible, official rationalisations for lending such protection to the project of creating an exclusive Jewish state in Palestine, and attempts to disguise the consequences that have ensued. It does not aim to provide another forum for those already committed to solidarity with Palestine, but rather seeks to move the debate into public spaces where it is currently extremely difficult, often impossible, to raise the issue. Creating opportunities for raising awareness of conditions in Palestine, and the historical and ideological context, is particularly important, as we are convinced that Western support for the current situation is only sustainable in conditions of ignorance and silence. We would hope to be able to offer a mental health perspective to the lobbying of the political parties, media etc, in the wider movement to create a just solution for the Palestinians.

4. Basing our work on Human Rights and International Law

The Network begins from an explicit commitment to Human Rights and international law. It rejects all forms of racism and discriminatory practice. It will work to promote recognition of Israel's failure to respect international law, particularly such instruments as the Geneva Conventions, the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child, on Apartheid, on Torture, ICC and Security Council rulings on Ethnic Cleansing etc. It will expose the extent to which mainstream thinking on Israel/Palestine unreflectively incorporates a racialised discourse, one from which we would shrink were it being applied within a European context.

5. It is not just about 'the Occupation'

The Network will keep within view all the Palestinian groups, and in this way counteract Israeli attempts (actively supported by Britain) to fragment the Palestinian people. We recognise the importance of forming relationships with Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and also with Palestinian citizens of Israel, and with those who were driven out in 1948/9 and are still refused the right to return to Palestine and who, with their descendants, still live in refugee camps in the surrounding countries.

6. The Network has no ambition to proselytise

We can support research and publicize evidence that links the political situation to the pattern of mental ill-health and distress amongst the Palestinian people, but it is not the intention of the Network to become a provider of psychological services. Nor will it promote any particular treatment modality or theoretical approach to understanding or responding to psychological disturbance. We are aware that cultural differences, and in particular the extreme political circumstances, make the de-contextualised individualism typical of dominant Western psychiatric services of limited value. Rather we would hope to learn how Palestinians have approached the questions of understanding and responding to psychological distress in their community.

Potential Areas of Work

7. The Network as a communications hub linking the mental health communities of Palestine and the UK

Through whatever means are employed to share information amongst its members and with the wider public, the Network could publicise the work of Palestinian mental health services, and of those groups in the UK who cooperate with them. The Palestine Trauma Centre, and its British arm PTC-UK, were represented at the meeting, and there is much more to learn about their work. Sumud Palestine, a UK group headed by Dr Mohamed Mukheimar which works alongside the Palestine Counselling Centre was also mentioned, along with the psychiatric training programmes of IMET2000. Publicising such projects, their development programmes, training needs, skills shortages etc may be a practical means of supporting and enhancing the effectiveness of their work.

8. Maximising opportunities for direct communication between Palestinian and UK mental health workers

We can work in particular to maximise opportunities for face-to-face connections between British and Palestinian mental health workers, both in Britain when our Palestinian counterparts are able to visit, and by encouraging UK-based professionals to go Palestine themselves. We see this as an activity that should be emphasized, given the difficulty of receiving any realistic view of conditions in Palestine from our media and the impediments to travel imposed on the Palestinians. By going ourselves we counteract the idea that such visits are unsafe, that Palestinians are in some way dangerous, and we also undermine the impression that Israel is a Western-style democratic country concerned with its security against 'terrorism'.

9. Taking the message of solidarity to public spaces within the world of mental health

We heard that it would be 'impossible' to have a proper debate about Israel/Palestine within one of our leading psychotherapy registration bodies. The Network can test out to what extent public spaces within the mental health world are off-bounds to such debate, and it can challenge resistance to engaging with the question because it is 'controversial' or 'too political'. Without direct and open consideration, the Palestinians remain invisible and their voices unheard. The outcome is one where we help perpetuate the status quo. The Network could explore ways to take resolutions to our training and registration bodies that would encourage them to consider more closely our responsibilities, to review our existing engagement with Israel/Palestine.

10. The Boycott Divestment and Sanctions Campaign

The Network's hope is that the conditions will be created that will allow for a fundamental reformation of inter-community relationships in Palestine, such as will allow the two communities to engage in re-building a peaceful future on the basis of equality and mutual respect. It understands this to be the ultimate aim of the burgeoning movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions. This is a non-violent movement building on a call made to the world by Palestinian civil society, and in essence all it requests is that we do not participate in any way in their ongoing subjugation. Not to support the boycott would be to undermine the possibility that such a shift in the balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians could be achieved in a peaceful manner. To oppose, or to disregard, the boycott would jeopardize our relationship with Palestinian mental health providers: with their betrayal by the 'international community', great hopes have been placed by the Palestinians in the moral stance taken by civil society across the globe in isolating Israel and forcing it to change. We see the Network as having a role in discussing with the mental health community in the UK appropriate measures to express our solidarity, and to seek from our professional bodies a response to the Palestinian call for us to support the boycott. We can learn from the work of other professional bodies in this area - lawyers, architects, church groups etc.

11. Technology, communication, agitation.

The Network will discuss the optimal realistic means by which it can undertake this work. It hopes to establish a website, use Facebook and Twitter, to issue a Newsletter, to encourage online debate

through blogging etc. We are hoping that there will be sufficient expertise within the membership to develop such activities, both editorial and technological.

12. Challenges

The meeting was alive with positive energy, but to achieve any of the ideas raised means to face huge challenges. Our attempts to stimulate debate, change opinions and pass resolutions within our professional organisations will be met with opposition. The Network will hopefully provide a base from which such initiatives can be co-ordinated and where mutual support can be found.

There are huge number of people involved in the mental health community in the UK: the majority of those at the meeting were probably psychotherapists, with a number of psychiatrists and psychologists. How do we establish an active presence amongst the full range of professional groups involved in mental health care? Can we be active through the trade union network?

Other suggestions: that we should draw up clear answers to the ways that pro-Zionists seek to close down conversation on Israel/Palestine.

The meeting concluded with an overwhelmingly show of hands that marked the formal establishment of the UK-Palestine Mental Health Network.