

What are you afraid of?

Statement by Psychotherapists standing against Genocide

We write as members of the psychotherapy profession to register our dismay that – to our knowledge – not one of our professional associations has issued a clear statement protesting the genocide in Gaza.

This appeal to our professional bodies is based on three inter- connected factors

- The material and psychological effects of the unrestrained violence and destruction unleashed by the Israeli state on the life, infrastructure and liveable spaces for Palestinians in Gaza and the ethnic cleansing, land theft, extrajudicial killing and illegal carceral policies in the West Bank.
- The need for all psychotherapy organisations to adhere to their ethical codes of conduct in confronting this level of violence and slaughter
- The duty of professional organisations representing psychotherapists (whether or not employed in the public sector) to protect them from the silencing and discrimination they frequently experience when raising their voices in protest at genocide.

1. As psychotherapists working with individuals, families, parents and children, we draw attention to the deliberate assault on the mental wellbeing of Palestinians, on their families, social networks and on the civil society institutions that should sustain them. We are acutely aware of the intergenerational effects of the trauma inflicted on Palestinian families over decades which will have reached utterly catastrophic proportions following October 2023.

We know at first hand that the traumas such as multiple bereavements, severe injuries and amputations which Palestinians are suffering in Gaza would test even the most resilient families living in safe and stable homes and with a functioning social environment. As it is, these catastrophic losses and injuries have been faced by serially displaced people enduring constant bombardment, drone attacks, starvation and disease.

The Palestinian people confront these challenges without the extended family structures which afford support for parents and children, because entire generations have been obliterated.

On the West Bank, almost nine hundred Palestinians have been killed since October 2023; violent appropriation of land, destruction of buildings infrastructure and agriculture continue with the full connivance of the Israeli army.

Arrests and incarceration have intensified, including those of children. We know that being powerless to protect their children is one of the most debilitating and depressing experiences for parents and erodes the intimacy and safety of family life.

The effects on generations of Palestinians will be immeasurable. They have no reason to feel any hope for the future – even though their capacity for hope is

significant – and, without hope, recovery from trauma is impossible. Neither can a population recover from trauma unless there is a degree of accountability, justice and the restoration of dignity and agency.

As psychotherapists we know that when no external boundaries are imposed on those who flout laws and ethical norms, cruelty, violence and sadism are likely to intensify. Extremism and racism flourish amid conditions of impunity and this is the environment that the West has permitted to grow in Israel. By not issuing clear statements in opposition to these crimes, our professional bodies too collude with this culture of impunity

2. All Psychotherapists are bound by professional codes of ethics. While these vary in different therapeutic modalities, all are committed to anti-racist practice, to following the precept of “Do No Harm” and to acting to prevent violence and abuse. The principle of therapeutic neutrality does not override the responsibility to act to prevent harm. Here most therapists would be especially mindful of the effects of gross imbalances of power as when harm is inflicted upon a child or vulnerable adult. Similarly in situations where manifest harm is being committed against a defenceless population by a vastly superior military power, we have an ethical duty to oppose it. Many professional associations had no difficulty in making statements against the Russian occupation of Ukraine where a more powerful nation attacked a weaker neighbour and most did not, as they do now, hide behind the precept of ‘not being political.’

Refusing to take a stand against the genocidal war on Gaza when it is Palestinian Arabs who are under attack points to profoundly racist assumptions about the victims, which is another contravention of our professional ethics. Most of our professional bodies have embraced the ‘Black Lives Matter’ agenda and have been willing in various ways to take seriously the need to decolonise our theoretical frameworks and teaching materials. However in the case of the Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine, there is silence and avoidance and those who raise it are responded to with evasion at best.

Given that a large number of well-respected organisations* have confirmed that Israel is practicing apartheid in Palestine and genocide in Gaza, why will our professional organisations not address this directly? Psychotherapists take as given the importance of being able to name difficult dynamics, but how many of our associations have even brought themselves to use these words? In this avoidance they are directly mirroring the government which will neither name genocide nor admit the reasons for not naming it – usually because of pressure or threats from Israel or its defenders, fear of ‘causing offence’ or of being accused of antisemitism. When this happens, language dissolves into vacuous and evasive homilies such as ‘concern for suffering’ that do nothing to change the intolerable status quo. As psychotherapists we know how to identify contexts where a clear position is being avoided and meaningless language substituted. Refusing to take a stand on, or even name what is being perpetrated on the people of Palestine is one of them.

3. In the absence of any clear ethical position from our professional organisations, those therapists who have been censured, disciplined or been the subject of complaints when they spoke up for Palestinian rights are unprotected. We can

provide evidence of many such instances when either the professional association failed to act to support its members or when members, having read the responses of their professional bodies, have not considered it worthwhile even to ask for support. If our organisations focus only on the pain and distress of different communities affected by 'the conflict', those who feel uncomfortable or unsafe when colleagues speak up about Palestine are responded to as if they are subjected to an attack equivalent to the mass killing of forty six thousand Palestinians.

We now understand that statements in support of Ukraine (which we wholeheartedly endorsed) were easy for professional bodies to make because they were in line with government policy and they evoked no pushback from members with interests attached to Russia. An ethical position is put the test by willingness to adhere to it, despite opposition. In the case of Palestine we know there is massive pressure at work from the government downwards to neutralise protest and to label those who protest genocide as problematic rather than those who defend it. Even though a temporary ceasefire in Gaza is now in places, we know that the horror unleashed on the people of Gaza over the past fifteen months will be a stain on the conscience of all those organisations who failed to speak up against it. We do not believe you will wish to be in this position.

So we return to our question at the outset: What are you afraid of?

* Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UN Special Rapporteur, Lemkin Institute and many International Human rights Lawyers