

December 27, 2017

To the Members of the Board of Directors of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy:

We are writing to express our opposition to the recent decision by the Board of the IARPP to hold its 2019 international meeting in Israel, a decision made known by its outgoing president Dr. Chana Ullman. We respectfully request that the Board reconsider this decision.

Our opposition is rooted in the grave crisis posed by the Israeli occupation and its currently escalating attacks on the Palestinian people--attacks reflective of an overarching policy of ethnic cleansing and consequent seizure of land, restriction of freedom of movement, and control over natural resources. The occupation has launched from the beginning a wholesale assault on human rights and human dignity. All of these outrages have been well-documented by organizations such as Amnesty International, the United Nations and its various taskforces, as well as countless scholars, historians, and research scientists. Nonetheless, for many people in the USA and in Israel itself, the culpability of the state of Israel has been effectively masked by a massive campaign of misinformation and news blackout.

President Donald Trump's December 2017 announcement of the decision to relocate the American Embassy to Jerusalem provides a particularly urgent focus to our appeal. Israel has not hesitated to make use of this opportunity to redouble its efforts to force the relocation of thousands of Palestinians from Jerusalem and to seize their homes, lands, and businesses. This process has been characterized throughout by an absence of due process and a reliance instead upon intimidation, extrajudicial assassination, and torture of Palestinians--including the torture of children, often involving sexual assault.

We concern ourselves with the urgent problem of the occupation first as human beings, but secondarily as mental health workers dedicated to humanitarian values and deeply aware of the importance of these values to the well-being of children, families, and communities. As mental health workers familiar with the impact of violence on both individual health and collective well-being, we feel we have an added responsibility to make our voices heard.

We hold the state of Israel responsible for perpetrating massive injury to the Palestinian people, through its relentless assault on the minds and bodies of its individuals and its remorseless ambition to annihilate Palestinian history, culture, economy, artifacts, architecture, and community life. To locate international conferences related to any professional domain in Israel, in our view, represents a tacit acceptance of the behavior of the state of Israel and perpetuates a fictional "normalization" of relations between Israel and occupied Palestine. To hold such conferences cannot help but advance the interests of the state of Israel through the implication that Israel welcomes a free exchange of ideas--to say nothing of filling its hotels, restaurants, and auditoriums with appreciative audiences. To object to the choice of Israel as the location of international conferences is a way of bringing the conduct of the state of Israel into the foreground as a subject of discussion and debate, so that the extent of the dispossession and suffering of the Palestinian people can be acknowledged.

It is particularly ironic and painful to see Israel chosen as the site of an international conference when the central theme of the particular organization is the in-depth understanding of human relationships.

The majority of IARPP members live in the USA and the next largest national group live in Israel. Some members of the Israeli IARPP have suggested that the 2019 conference can ameliorate the problem posed by choosing Israel as its meeting place by inviting Palestinian speakers and presentations by Israeli organizations of progressive mental health professionals concerned with political conflict. Yet Palestinian speakers and conference attendees may find merely showing up at the conference to be impossible due to checkpoints, movement restrictions, blacklisting of activists, and other everyday experiences familiar to Palestinians--abuses of power which no conference in Israel can change and which inevitably reproduce the power dynamics of the political situation in the microcosm of the conference. Nevertheless, we agree that taking these steps in theory can move the IARPP the right direction; we trust that such activities are pursued by the Israeli group as part of its regular year-round functioning and not solely when foreigners are present. But regardless of these considerations, these well-intentioned efforts to bring some mention of the Palestinian perspective into the international conference do not speak to the central issue--the necessity of demonstrating to the world that Israel must be held accountable for its behavior.

The target of our protest is the behavior of the state of Israel. Our objection here is not to any individual or to IARPP as an organization. We fully acknowledge that there are members of the IARPP who have been actively supportive of Palestine and a great many others who may be very willing to listen to voices expressing dissent from Israeli policy. Our objection is to the decision by the Board of the IARPP to hold the 2019 conference in Israel. We hold this decision to be reprehensible because it shields Israel from public exposure of its atrocities--an exposure which is very much overdue.

We hope to hear that our colleagues at the IARPP Board will reopen debate regarding this decision.

Yours truly,

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