

Psychologists Call for Justice and Accountability: Confronting the Atrocities Against Palestinian Lives

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As 2025 begins, violent conflicts and gross violations of human rights are causing death and displacement on a massive scale, creating humanitarian crises around the world.¹ As psychologists, we take seriously the February 2021 policy resolution on “APA, Psychology and Human Rights,” adopted by American Psychological Association’s Council of Representatives, which encourages members of our profession “to support and advocate for populations at risk of human rights violations, including marginalized populations both domestically and globally.”² This resolution followed a report from the APA Task Force on Human Rights, which included the recommendation that “APA’s advocacy for human rights should extend to international human rights concerns, including in some situations making direct requests or criticisms of foreign governments.”³

Consistent with these advocacy priorities, here we specifically seek to bring heightened attention to and greater engagement with the current unparalleled devastation of Gaza.⁴ This destruction is a catastrophic escalation of collective violence against the Palestinian people. Most have already endured an immiserating and decades-long unlawful occupation⁵ and, in the specific case of Gaza, a crippling 17-year blockade.⁶

Reflecting numerous reports, findings, and recommendations from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights over the past 15 months,⁷ we call for an immediate, unconditional, and sustained ceasefire; the release of all hostages in Gaza as well as Palestinians subjected to arbitrary detention in Israel; an arms embargo on any further supplying of offensive weapons; the urgent and unfettered provision of humanitarian aid; the timely and dedicated reconstruction of Gaza’s infrastructure, healthcare system, educational facilities, and neighborhoods; and accountability before international judicial bodies for all violations of international law. We believe it is the duty of our profession and the APA — an accredited nongovernmental organization at the UN with a stated commitment to “respect and promote human rights” as a guiding principle⁸ — to stand, speak, and act in unequivocal support of these goals.

As psychologists based primarily in the United States, we issue this statement keenly aware of the distinctively strong alliance between the U.S. and Israel,⁹ and the crucial and calamitous role that the U.S. government has played in supporting Israel’s 15-month assault on Gaza. As recently as November 2024, the U.S. cast the sole vote against a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire.¹⁰ The United States has also continued to provide Israel with billions of dollars of munitions¹¹ — despite compelling evidence that these weapons are being used against civilians in violation of U.S. and international law.¹²

In August 2024, the APA’s legislative Council of Representatives called for an “immediate, permanent, and comprehensive ceasefire in the Israel-Gaza conflict.”¹³ That formal resolution acknowledged that “military actions have disrupted access to resources needed to fulfill basic needs and destroyed critical infrastructure, including medical facilities, educational institutions, and cultural centers.” It also highlighted psychological research documenting “the detrimental effects of exposure to violence and conflict on mental health, including increased rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression” and the “significant long-term negative psychosocial outcomes that ripple out to families and communities and persist across generations” that result from armed conflict.

Now five months later, Israel has persisted in its relentless assault on the Palestinian people, and there is an urgent need to reiterate and reinforce the serious concerns raised in that APA resolution. We join the worldwide condemnation of the staggering destruction of Gaza — the result of documented war crimes by Israeli military forces.¹⁴ Over 46,000 Palestinians have been killed according to official records, most of them women and children.¹⁵ But that figure likely significantly underestimates the actual total when deaths due to indirect violence-related causes are also counted.¹⁶ Many times more have suffered serious and life-altering injuries, including a staggering number of children who have required amputation of one or more limbs — often without anesthesia or pain medication.¹⁷ Gaza’s health care,¹⁸ education,¹⁹ and vital water²⁰ systems have all been destroyed. Almost the entire population of Gaza — two million Palestinians — has been displaced at least once.²¹ Famine is now increasingly widespread,²² and an epidemic of paralytic polio was avoided only through the extraordinary efforts of health and community workers.²³

At the same time, we acknowledge that the precipitous escalation of violence in Gaza over the past 15 months has transpired after documented war crimes²⁴ were perpetrated by Hamas and other armed groups inside Israel on October 7, 2023. We deplore the killing of nearly 1,200 Israelis and the taking of almost 250 hostages on that day. We also recognize the pain and hardship of the continuing dislocation of tens of thousands of Israeli citizens from their homes and the deep and lasting trauma experienced by the country, its inhabitants, and members of the Jewish diaspora far beyond Israel’s borders. *But these deeply disturbing realities do not justify Israel’s profoundly disproportionate, indiscriminate, and ongoing destruction of Gaza and its people.*

Our views are consistent with essential points highlighted in an APA press release issued shortly after the October 7th attacks.²⁵ At that time, APA wrote, “There can be no justification for holding people hostage. There can be no justification for cutting off access to basic necessities, such as electricity, food and medicine.” We fully agree and we call for the immediate release of all hostages in Gaza, where they have been held inhumanely for 15 months,²⁶ and for the release of prisoners unduly held in administrative detention in Israel, where many have been subjected to abuse and torture.²⁷ We also call for Israel to immediately end its ongoing disruption of humanitarian aid to Gaza, a horrific form of collective punishment.²⁸ The same APA press release “deplores the human cost of aggression, including violations of human rights, adverse humanitarian consequences, deep psychological distress, and the loss of dignity and freedom. All individuals deserve to live

free of fear and violence so that their mental health and well-being can flourish.” Here too, we agree completely.

We recognize as well that in 2008, the APA’s Council of Representatives adopted a resolution against genocide.²⁹ This resolution emphasizes that organizations like the APA have an important role to play in increasing awareness of the causes of and solutions to genocide, and it notes that psychologists can make unique contributions in the realms of education, research, and counseling. The resolution references the definition of genocide adopted by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.³⁰ According to that definition, genocide constitutes acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.” Among the specific examples provided is “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.” The APA resolution also states that “indirect acts of destruction such as...forced starvation are also crimes against humanity” and that genocide causes “psychological devastation,” including “long term intergenerational traumatic effects on whole communities.”

We understand that claims of genocide in the context of Gaza are disturbing and disconcerting. But we believe it is nonetheless our responsibility to bring attention to this issue, in accord with the APA’s guidance to raise awareness about such overwhelming harms. In this regard, we note that highly respected international human rights organizations³¹ and distinguished genocide scholars across the world (including Israeli Jews)³² have concluded that the essential conditions constituting acts of genocide — including intent³³ — do in fact exist in Gaza. We encourage our fellow psychologists, psychologists-in-training, and other readers to review these and other assessments, including the reporting of investigative journalists and research teams.³⁴

As psychologists, we also feel a particular responsibility to speak out against Israel’s assault on Gaza’s healthcare and educational systems. First, as mental health practitioners, we are horrified by the deliberate destruction of healthcare facilities and the targeting of healthcare personnel,³⁵ with hundreds already killed. American healthcare professionals who volunteered in Gaza recently reported that they “witnessed crimes beyond comprehension.”³⁶ Second, as teachers and researchers, we are similarly distraught over the systematic destruction of Gaza’s educational institutions. Nearly all of them have been damaged or destroyed — including every university — and hundreds of educators and scholars have been killed.³⁷ As a result, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian students have lost all opportunity for formal education. UN experts and other scholars have referred to this as scholasticide.³⁸

Given such realities, we reject as wholly unwarranted any claims that voicing these concerns is an expression of antisemitism. We oppose efforts aimed at silencing or prohibiting criticism of Israel³⁹ — or criticism of any other country, including the United States — over its actions and policies. To be clear, we too are distressed by the growing threat posed by the scourge of antisemitism. Our understanding of the term is consistent with the definition provided by the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, a statement endorsed by hundreds of scholars of the Holocaust, Jewish studies, and Middle East studies:

“discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish).”⁴⁰ (By contrast, the “definition” adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance has received numerous critical scholarly assessments for conflating criticism of Israel with hostility toward Jews in general.⁴¹) We condemn the actions of opportunists who take advantage of the horrors unfolding in Gaza to foment hatred toward Jews in general, and we are concerned that Israel’s 15-month assault has diminished the safety of Jews everywhere.⁴²

However, we are also deeply critical of the political posturing and the crackdowns in response to nonviolent protests by college students and faculty — including Jews — who support Palestinian rights and a ceasefire.⁴³ We fear that this inordinate focus distracts attention from white nationalists and similar groups⁴⁴ that encourage violence — against Jews, Muslims, Blacks, immigrants, and other communities — in order to prevent the “replacement” of white people.⁴⁵ Consistent with this concern, recent research has shown that, in the United States, “the epicenter of antisemitic attitudes is young adults on the far right.”⁴⁶

To conclude, we join with the APA’s Council of Representatives in urging “all actors to prioritize the protection of civilians, to adhere to international humanitarian law, and to engage in meaningful dialogue and negotiation toward just and sustainable resolutions.”⁴⁷ We are further committed to the preservation of human life, respect for human dignity, and the pursuit of a just peace that provides freedom, security, and equal rights for all in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel, and the surrounding region. For us, as the carnage and destruction continue, silence and passivity are unacceptable.

January 17, 2025

The Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence welcomes endorsement and dissemination of this statement by the APA, by other APA divisions, and by other organizations.

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