

The moral bankruptcy of psychoanalysis Part 1: the profession's response to genocide



What does psychoanalysis stand for? What are the qualities that characterise its outlook on the world, and the performance of its adherents? If asked, psychoanalytic clinicians would likely talk about open-mindedness, the capacity to sustain doubt and uncertainty, to be cognisant of ambiguity and complexity, resisting the pressure towards binary, 'either/or' explanations. To be able to recover and maintain the capacity to think under abnormal emotional pressure. And, in addition, they might refer to a profession founded on compassion and empathy, on an openness to the subjective experience of others, a tireless reaching for the truth unswayed by convention or custom, by political or religious dogma.

If this is the self-image of the average psychoanalyst, it is reasonable to keep these virtues in mind when reviewing the way in which mainstream psychoanalytic associations have responded to the crisis in Gaza.

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On October 9th, the International Psychoanalytic Associations (IPA) issued [a statement](#)¹ in which it conveyed its horror at what it described as an 'unprecedented massive attack ... launched by the terrorist group Hamas'. What had transpired was 'a reminder of the darkest moments in human history', put down to 'splitting and projection so extreme that they lead to a completely demonization of civilian populations'.

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https://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/News/IPA_Statements/IPA_Statement__Hamas_Terrorist_Attack_on_Israel_October_2023.aspx

It is not through a wish to minimize or condone the attacks on Jewish Israeli civilians that we comment on this highly partisan framing of events. What this opening sentence made clear is that the IPA had taken sides, embracing an interpretation of the attacks that abjured complexity or history. The opening paragraph prepared us for a propaganda announcement on behalf of Israel, and this is what we received. We would want to ask: why ‘unprecedented’, when referring to Gaza, where much larger atrocities carried out against civilians have become commonplace?²

Embarrassingly, psychoanalytic concepts were then instrumentalized to crank up the IPA’s demonization of Hamas, asserting that its operation represented ‘the unrestrained release of the death instinct to cause harm to the innocent with no regard for moral standards or other psychological balancing forces’. The unstated implication is that such actions did not need to be comprehended as a product of the colonizer-colonized relationship: the Israeli regime itself was also an innocent victim of the attacks.

We ask whether the shallowness of this position, adhering closely to the stance taken by all Western governments to mobilize and justify Israel’s bloody response, violates moral and professional ethics?

Even by the time this statement was being written, there could be no doubt that the Israeli regime was launching a devastating assault on Gaza in which it would totally disregard international law regarding the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. Israel’s President denied that there were any innocent people in Gaza; Defence Minister Yoav Gallan described the Palestinians as ‘human animals’. Such sentiments were repeated at all levels of society, as the pain and anger of the Jewish Israeli public was whipped up into a frenzy of vengeance, with many calls for the wholesale demolition of Gaza and destruction of its people.

The IPA Statement was premature, biased and showed no interest in linking the inhumane condition in which the people of Gaza have lived these past two decades with the Hamas operation. It thus replicated an ‘understanding’ of October 7th without reference to its relational context. It is not controversial to remind the IPA that the 2.4 million civilians living in Gaza had been subject to decades of cruel, even sadistic, oppression to a degree inconceivable to the analysts who composed this Statement. They presumed to speak on behalf of all constituent associations of the IPA and their members in a clumsy and mistimed expression of solidarity with a regime that was about to [launch a genocidal assault](#)³ on the Palestinian people.

This is what followed. On 27th October, well into the military campaign that has shocked and dismayed opinion around the globe, and which had already been described as a potential genocide by the [United Nations](#)⁴ and numerous other organizations and academics, the President of the IPA, Harriet Wolfe, issued [a second letter](#)⁵. Here it stated:

In the last month, starting October 7th, the world has been shocked by dramatic evidence of cruelty and brutal assault on human life. Innocent bystanders continue to fear for their lives. Hostages including children are held, tortured, and some have been killed. The

² Psychoanalytic institutions are not unique in the failure described in this piece. See Jabr, S. ‘[Why US mental health associations justify Israel’s genocidal attack on Gaza](#)’, Middle East Eye, 15th October 2023

³ https://mcusercontent.com/bbabb624d68a80f2ac0f259dc/files/f617e720-79cf-8f02-a355-09d604c6d3e5/cm_final_letter_signed_pdf.pdf

⁴ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/gaza-un-experts-decry-bombing-of-hospitals-and-schools-as-crimes-against-humanity-call-for-prevention-of-genocide/>

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<https://ipa.informz.net/informzdataservice/onlineversion/pub/bWFpbGluZ2luc3RhbmNlaWQ9OTA5NTcwOA==>

methods and ideology of Hamas raise the spectre of the Holocaust. Non-terrorist Palestinians suffer inhumane conditions and extreme violence. How can we respond?

Even in the midst of the relentless bombardment of civilian areas and the wholesale massacre of thousands of people, the majority of them the elderly, woman and children, the IPA could not recover its sense of balance, or show any signs of comprehending the perspective of the Palestinian people. Issued at a moment when millions of people were under total siege, desperate for water and food and power, with [Netanyahu evoking](#)⁶ God's instruction to the Israelites to eliminate the Amalekites, ("Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys"), Wolfe blandly re-iterated her earlier linking of Hamas with Nazism. It does not seem to have dawned on her that she might be aiding and abetting the commitment of further atrocities. Her letter contains several further paragraphs that defy comprehension or summary. We were drawn to the following sentence:

As practitioners of a profession that is embedded in humanitarian values and ethical standards we stand with innocent victims on all sides in this new area of conflict and in the other areas of violent conflict already active in the world.

It is a shame that these 'humanitarian values and ethical standards' could not be spelt out more precisely, so that we could see how they could be properly applied to the unimaginably dire and criminal situation under consideration. Perhaps it would have been difficult to provide details: the list may have included anti-racism, which would contradict the absolutism they were offering to Israeli society. Or respect for the law. The letter ends with a confused reference to the history of genocide that still haunts the history of Australia – either a clumsy misreading of the parallels with the colonial history of Palestine, or (perhaps) an intended, indirect swipe at Zionism. We suspect the former.

[A further note](#)⁷ from the IPA was issued on 6th November, apparently in response to tensions and disagreements within the organization. Yet, in an inexcusable expression of its continued inability to imagine Palestinians dying as a result of Israeli aggression, it stated:

A primary concern for the IPA is for its members and candidates in the Israel Psychoanalytic Society, their direct experience of atrocities committed by Hamas that began on October 7th and the ongoing daily threat to their families', friends', patients', and their own lives.

It was again stated that the atrocities 'began' on October 7th, blocking any broadening of perspective that would mean placing those events within an intercommunal context in which Israel, and perhaps the Israel Psychoanalytic Society, could not be straightforwardly perceived as victims. While Hamas was again demonized, there was again no reference to Israel's disproportionate response, to the daily documenting of its war crimes against civilians. The IPA's position was unrelentingly supportive of the Israeli regime and its 'war' on the people of Gaza.

Peculiarly, for an international non-governmental health organization, it contained no call for an immediate cessation of military operations. There was no demand for a ceasefire.

Nor was mention made of the parallel madness then being visited upon Palestinian communities in the West Bank, resulting in further mass killings, the ethnic cleansing of more Palestinian villages, and large-scale incarceration. Taking the violence unleashed here into account might have undermined the polarized good-and-evil fantasy that informs all the IPA's contributions.

⁶ <https://electronicintifada.net/content/netanyahu-abuses-bible-impress-us-evangelicals/40061>

⁷ https://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/News/Response_to_October_2023_Newsletter.aspx

It was at this juncture that a **Statement of the Members of the Israeli Psychoanalytic Societies and Institutes**⁸ was issued on behalf of the leading psychoanalytic and Jungian associations⁹.

In even more hyperbolic language than that used by the IPA, this letter described the Hamas operation as being ‘like a violent eruption of a volcano, the earth unleashed the most absolute explosion of evil’; it refers in the next paragraph to ‘this outbreak of sheer evil and inhumanity... [it] is entirely a war against all humanity’. So something akin to a natural disaster, yet one in which one saw the work a fiendish distillation of evil: the kind one often sees now in horror movies (like ‘A Quiet Place’, where nobody can be safe until the monsters who have invaded our world have been eradicated).

As we are all aware, this letter was issued long after Israel had announced a ‘complete siege’ on Gaza, cutting off electricity, food, water and gas. Israel’s Ambassador to the UK, Tzipi Hotovely, disclaimed any responsibility for what might follow: ‘It is Hamas to be blamed [for] anything that will happen to civilians.’ The world was already reeling from the wholesale slaughter and destruction that Israel was wreaking on the people of Gaza.

The Israeli Analytic Societies’ letter exactly replicates the Ambassador’s grounds for disavowing all responsibility for the consequences of Israel’s bombardment of civilians. While emphasizing that they are ‘ethically committed to the well-being of people on both sides’, their regret for the harm inflicted on ‘children and innocent people’ is immediately qualified by blaming the victims for their own misfortune: ‘It is shocking that Hamas deliberately hides among them and endangers their lives’. In appealing for the analytic community’s ‘solidarity’, it underlines this theme, repeating that Hamas is ‘using civilians as human shields’.

The letter repeats the statistics for Jewish Israelis believed to have been killed and abducted in the Hamas attack, but makes no reference to the thousands upon thousands of Palestinians by then killed, injured, homeless and displaced. It notes the

130,000 [Israeli] civilians evacuated from their homes, living as refugees in their own country. For this reason, as any other country, Israel has the right and the obligation to protect its own citizens.

There is an unintended irony in Israeli analysts decrying people having to live as ‘refugees in their own country’ – a phrase that well describes the condition in which the vast majority of Gazans have lived for the last 75 years, and which has to be a central factor in any meaningful understanding of what happened on October 7th. But the sentence is more sinister than this. The abstract assertion of Israel’s ‘right to self-defense’ has a specific meaning at this time, being employed by Israel’s allies to endorse whatever Israel chooses to inflict on Gaza. The Israeli Analytic Societies are openly lining up behind their Government, defending its wholesale destruction of civilian life there, and calling on the international analytic community to do the same.

The letter concludes with an exercise in splitting designed to tarnish the mass expressions of popular disgust at Israel’s destruction of Gaza. It insinuates that those demonstrating for a ceasefire are indifferent to the killing of Jewish Israeli civilians, and that those statements

⁸ <https://ukpalmhn.com/resources/ukpmhn-statement-the-moral-bankruptcy-of-psychoanalysis/ukpalmhn-statement-additional-material/>

⁹ The Israel Psychoanalytic Society, the Tel Aviv Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis, the Human Spirit Psychoanalytic-Buddhist Training Programme, the Israeli Society for Analytical Psychology, the Israeli Institute of Jungian Psychology, the New Israeli Jungian Association, the Israeli Institute of Group Analysis.

that do not focus on denouncing Hamas ‘dehumanize’ Israelis and are counter to a belief in human rights. In a manner characteristic of Zionist discourse, they cannot perceive a position different from their own which is not anti-Semitic and hostile to Jews as Jews. They cannot hear the humanitarian and democratic essence that has been the overwhelming message of these demonstrations, calling not just for an immediate ceasefire but also for a Palestine free from colonialism, racism and injustice, returning it to its long history of ethnic and religious tolerance.

It is both entirely understandable, and quite extraordinary, that there are psychoanalysts who have lived and worked for many years within spitting distance of Gaza, the world’s largest open air prison, subject to systematic impoverishment and regular bombardment, without noticing it, or protesting against it, or perhaps imagining that there might be a cost to being complicit in its ruination.

Every time we hear about the ‘unprecedented’, ‘unprovoked’, ‘eruption’ of violence, as if it came out of nowhere, we remember what they (pretend to) forget: the unarmed protesters (and paramedics, journalists etc.) murdered in their hundreds and wounded in their thousands by Israeli snipers during the Great March of Return. Just yesterday.

The denial of this context is indicative of an adherence to an ideology of ethnic supremacy, where there is only one group of fully human actors. The authors perceive no ethical tension in their adherence to settler colonialism and apartheid, and do not for a moment entertain the idea of racial equality as the basis for a just and secure future for all. Israel is ‘their country’, not the country of the Palestinian people.

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These official communications largely confirm the conclusions that Kemp and Pinto reached in their discussion of anti-Palestinian racism within psychoanalysis ([What would Freud have made of it?¹⁰](#)). Psychoanalysis is not ‘neutral’. As the Mental Health Networks have been arguing for years, they demonstrate that the mental health community is an active element within civil society, contributing directly to the evolution of public opinion – for better or for worse.

In the second IPA communication, Harriet Wolfe reports that: ‘A majority of Board members endorsed the restatement of the first part of my article noted below’. The paragraph in question repeated the biased and racist readings of the crisis described above. She here makes it clear that the IPA Board is dominated by apologists for the Israeli regime. We believe that the IPA ought to publicize this fact to its member associations and their members, and that it should rescind its 2020 [Statement on Anti-Racism¹¹](#), which conveys a dishonest and inaccurate impression of the IPA’s attitude towards racism, colonialism and apartheid.

It is time for an open and sustained discussion of what ethical values are essential to and consistent with psychoanalysis; and for an exploration of how psychoanalytic cultures evolve in lived experience, faced with the pressures exerted upon civil society to conform with hegemonic ideas that might be diametrically at odds with their stated principles.

What is suggested by the statements issued by mainstream psychoanalytic associations in the midst of this crisis is that psychoanalysis had abandoned any aspiration to intellectual or moral integrity. Their use of words – ‘evil’, ‘terrorism’, ‘Holocaust’ – contributes to the societal pressure to establish walls and borders between the human and the sub-human, along with the terrible consequences that follow. There is here a blindness to their own

¹⁰ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/aps.1825>

¹¹ https://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/News/IPA_Anti-Racism_Statement_2021.aspx

contribution to the wounding effect of such words, and a blind eye turned to the actual wounding and killing inflicted by others. We shall continue to struggle against a psychoanalysis that is content to operate without concern in a settler colonial context, and within the norms of an apartheid society that perpetuates the exclusivity and privileges of one group to the detriment and intensified precarity of another.

Addendum:

Just as the above commentary was concluded, we received news that the **IPA Prejudice, Discrimination, Racism Committee** had issued a new statement, entitled **[‘The rise of antisemitism in the wake of the Hamas barbaric attack’](#)**¹². It is signed by Abel Fainstein (Chair), Paula Kliger, Rosine Perelberg, Raya Zonana and Mira Erlich Ginor (Ex officio).

There is little need to dwell on the text of this new document. One paragraph perhaps deserves further mention:

It must be made clear that the terror against Israel is not motivated by economic, geographic, or political conflicts: all of Israel is considered a holy land that must not be defiled by the presence of “infidels”, whether Christians or Jews. The statement of freeing Palestine from occupation, “From the River to the Sea”, reveals a clear intent to eliminate the State of Israel. A fight against Hamas is a fight of light against darkness, of liberalism against the forces of oppression.

This framing allows its authors to assert that ‘the terror’, read to embrace any form of resistance activity by Palestinians and their allies, has no other basis – it is not ‘economic, geographic or political’ – than anti-Semitism. In other words, any discussion of Zionism as a racist ideology feeding a settler colonial project, of its wanting to take the land without integrating its indigenous population; any discussion of the nature and consequences of the dismemberment of the Palestinians, controlled by the classic colonial strategy of divide and rule, can be ignored. Likewise, any talk of a decolonised Palestine in which Muslims, Jews and Christians might live together free from racial injustice and internal borders – the true meaning of the slogan ‘Between the River and the Sea, Palestine will be free’ – can be dismissed as hateful and racist.

Mira Erlich Ginor has form here already. In 2014 she wrote a **[‘Letter from Jerusalem’](#)**¹³ addressed to German psychoanalysts and appealing for their support in the midst of another terrible massacre being inflicted on the people of Gaza. This time, her jaundiced views are being issued in the name of the International Psychoanalytic Association – and by an IPA committee delegated with the task of addressing discrimination and racism!

This confirms the view that the IPA has been taken over by open advocates of Zionism mobilised to use the organization to promote the interests of the State of Israel. We call on IPA members to rebel against this alarming attack on the universal humanism that was once understood to be at the heart of the psychoanalytic project. We call on the IPA to withdraw the Statement issued by its Prejudice, Discrimination and Racism Committee, and to launch an investigation into its work.

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¹² <https://ukpalmhn.com/resources/ukpmhn-statement-the-moral-bankruptcy-of-psychoanalysis/ukpalmhn-statement-additional-material/>

¹³ <https://ukpalmhn.com/opinions/letter-from-jerusalem/>