



The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

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## **Psychologists' Response to the Violence in Gaza**

*This resource guide was approved by the SPSSI Executive Committee on April 2, 2024. [Click here to read a message from the committee on its release.](#)*

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*Thank you to all the authors and reviewers of this resource guide, including Alaina Brenick, Fade Eadeh, Patrick Grzanka, jaboalake, David Livert, Syed Muhammad Omar, Drew Paul, Lisa Rosenthal, Özge Savaş, as well as other contributors.*

In 1936, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) was founded with two main objectives: (1) to encourage research on psychological issues most vitally related to modern social, economic, and political policies; and (2) to help the public and its representatives understand and use contributions from the scientific investigation of human behavior in the formation of social and public policies.

At the time of SPSSI's founding, the world was in the grips of the Great Depression and marching towards a global war that would leave millions dead, wounded, imprisoned, or destitute. Among the first of activities of SPSSI was to urge policymakers and the public to reject the inevitability of war and to understand the psychological processes that promote violent and pro-war attitudes. War is not human nature (SPSSI Council, 1938). This was true in the 1930s and remains true today.

In recent months, the world has borne witness to—and complicity in—an unfolding escalation of violence primarily in Gaza. October 7, 2023 was not the start of this asymmetrical conflict<sup>1</sup> but rather the beginning of the most recent phase of violence and political strife in the region that began a century ago. On that day, Hamas fighters killed nearly 1,200 civilian and military personnel (UN OCHA, 2024) and abducted approximately 240 Israeli and foreign hostages from bordering

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<sup>1</sup> When writing about the historical and ongoing situation in Palestine and Israel, no one term or phrase can accurately reflect the history, nuances, power imbalances, and tragedies wrapped up in the region. “War”, “conflict”, “violence”, “occupation”, and “genocide”, to name several examples, may be accurate terms in some instances and inaccurate or inappropriate in others. Throughout this document, the authors employ a variety of terms, often returning to “violence” or “conflict,” while acknowledging and discussing deficiencies with these phrases. For more information, see Hakim et al. (2023).

kibbutzim and settlements near Gaza, per Israeli authorities, a number of whom were eventually released in a hostage swap for Palestinian women and adolescents in Israeli prisons (UN OCHA, 2023).

In response to this attack, as of March 15, 2024, per the Ministry of Health in Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have killed approximately 31,000 Palestinian civilians and Hamas fighters in Gaza (UN OCHA, 2024). On January 26, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) determined claims that Israel's actions against Palestinians in Gaza violate the Genocide Convention were "plausible" and ordered Israel to take multiple immediate measures to stop/prevent genocide.

While the direct victims of this present violence—who are overwhelmingly civilians—undoubtedly bear the greatest loss and trauma, the impact of this conflict has reverberated across the globe at personal, interpersonal, and political levels. Those with friends and family members in the region face their own trauma as they wait for and/or receive devastating news of their loved ones. Many individuals of Jewish, Muslim, Arab, Israeli, and/or Palestinian identities worldwide are contending with complex feelings of fear, guilt, and anger in an environment of rising prejudice against these groups. Others from a wide range of backgrounds and identities have their own intergenerational and collective trauma triggered in a unique way and are struggling with witnessing the horrific scale of violence while feeling desperate and helpless to stop it.

Academics, researchers, and scholars, meanwhile, who engage with meaningful critiques of interlocking systems of oppression or from a humanist and social justice orientation, are being silenced with threats to their personal safety and professional lives amidst a crackdown on academic freedom and a culture of fear.

As was the case in 1936, the psychologists and social scientists of SPSSI have a role in helping the public and its representatives understand this current violence and respond in a way grounded in scientific evidence. In doing so, psychologists engaged in this work have a responsibility to educate themselves about current events; reflect on who in one's professional life might be affected disproportionately by recent and ongoing events; and recognize their role as a source of support, information, or education about the social justice issues surrounding the existence of and reactions to the conflict.

The intent of this document is to help psychologists meet these responsibilities, providing resources to inform how they can respond to the generalized state of war, violence, and catastrophe in their professional lives as scholars, educators, therapists, and advocates. We recognize that, in their personal lives as well as in multidisciplinary collaborations, psychologists may do work beyond the scope of these domains. However, our evidence-based and expert-reviewed recommendations are limited to these domains, corresponding to the work of most SPSSI members. These recommendations are not binding and do not represent a mandate from SPSSI or any APA-related organization.

We begin with a brief—and therefore inherently non-comprehensive—timeline of the historical context around this present violence in Israel and Palestine. Section 1 discusses the role of

psychologists during events such as these. Section 2 reviews existing scholarly frameworks for research in and around the conflict; offers suggestions to scholars engaging in new or ongoing academic work; and shares resources and approaches for educators discussing difficult and developing topics, such as war, violence, and genocide, in the classroom. Section 3 focuses on the practice of psychotherapy for clinicians discussing the war with clients of diverse backgrounds. Finally, Section 4 includes resources for psychologists who wish to engage in policy and advocacy efforts as events unfold, in the eventual aftermath of violence, and in relation to long-term peace and justice in the region.

We conclude, consistent with SPSSI's organizational history, with a humble yet urgent plea for peace and justice. War is not inevitable and can be prevented. As SPSSI's founding generation once said, "if we learn how to discount the propaganda of war-makers and how to insist upon the peaceable adjustment of conflicts, there is no psychological reason for wars to continue" (SPSSI Council, 1938).

**To view a timeline of significant events in Israel and Palestine, visit**  
[www.spssi.org/violenceingaza](http://www.spssi.org/violenceingaza).

### ***Section 1: The Responsibility of Psychologists in Times of Violence***

The work of psychologists alone may not be enough to end violence in Gaza and elsewhere, but psychologists nonetheless have a necessary role in understanding, and therefore shaping, the conditions that promote violence and perpetuate injustice. Work by social, peace, and liberation psychologists engaged in other violent contexts, including conflicts in Central and Latin America and the Global South more broadly, can be instructive for psychologists considering their own role in Gaza today.

Before his assassination in 1989 by Salvadoran government soldiers who were trained in the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, liberation psychologist and theologian, Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994), spoke and wrote with a deep sense of urgency to call for a new praxis for psychology. For Martín-Baró, psychology played a critical role in changing the world order because consciousness, a psychological matter, is related to people's images of themselves that are a product of both personal and collective history. According to Martín-Baró, psychologists who study the mind have a role in ending violence, because consciousness is inseparable from ideology, social representations, stereotypes, as well as master and counter narratives. In his critique of oppressive systems and institutions, Martín-Baró always centered the interests of the Salvadoran people in their collective resistance and their struggle for peace and justice.

Central to Martín-Baró's (1994) work was the question, "What role does the psychologist play in the Central American context?" This context, which he characterized with three fundamental attributes, is also relevant to occupied Palestine and Israel prior to escalation of violence on and since October 7, 2023. These three attributes were: "structural injustice, revolutionary struggle, and the accelerated conversion of the nation states into satellites of the United States" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p.33). Even though Martín-Baró focused on the Central and Latin American context, the similarities are striking and are worth consideration by psychologists who would like to work

towards global peace, social justice, and a psychology that centers human rights and well-being across the world.

For psychologists considering their responsibilities in Gaza and Israel, it is important to recognize the structural injustices experienced in Palestine as (a) not singularly organized by one dimension of difference (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, or nation), and (b) connected to other struggles for justice, liberation, and self-determination worldwide in both the past and present. As Cole (2008, 2009) reminds us with her work on intersectionality, transformational social justice work necessitates similarities across experiences so that groups with different social and cultural identities can forge coalitions against systems of oppression (see also Sandoval, 2000). Today, from Central and Latin America to the Middle East and Africa, structural injustices make the lives of many communities across the world unlivable, particularly for those who are members of multiple stigmatized or marginalized social groups. Across nations in the Global South, communities in the global majority have not been able to satisfy their basic needs, such as nourishment, housing, health, and education, while small oligarchic minorities enjoy a superabundance of comforts and luxuries.

Second, the Global South is rife with revolutionary struggles, from the struggle of the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua to the Palestinian Liberation Front in Palestine. While struggles for self-determination and sovereignty are important for liberation, militarization of the societies and a generalized state of war for an extended period of time—along with the aforementioned structural injustices and poverty—are antithetical to human development and flourishing. This point needs to be discussed carefully by psychologists, as involvement in conflict zones and the deployment of humanitarian aid and project-based work can lead to the continuation of a generalized state of war, while de-politicizing the local revolutionary struggles (Marshall & Sousa, 2017). Humanitarian aid and psychosocial support are critical in times of escalated violence, as it is currently in Gaza, however psychology's role is not to replace revolutionary struggle with humanitarianism but rather to help people understand the dynamics that lead to revolutionary struggles while also providing essential psychosocial support.

The third similarity for psychologists to better understand the situation in Gaza and Israel is the conversion of nation states into satellites of the United States. In the case of Central America, Martín-Baró (1994) problematizes the United States's treatment of Central America as its backyard and questions the U.S. involvement in national security, writing, "... we are mortgaging our identity and independence without getting anything in return..." (p. 36). Advocates, activists, and scholars domestically and internationally campaigned against the complicity of the Western media and governments in Netanyahu's open-ended war on Gaza and the U.S.'s unconditional support of Israel's military with the transfer of weapons and aid. As psychologists, we are uniquely positioned to understand the global power circuits, dominant political, and cultural discourses and help dissolve illusions through "de-ideologizing" and "conscientización" (Martín-Baró, 1994; Freire, 1993; Torres Rivera, 2020).

In the context of the current violence, de-ideologizing harmful master narratives and conscientización can include engaging ourselves and supporting others to engage with some critical questions about histories of violence and trauma, such as:

- “What does an ahistorical fixation only on the pain and trauma of October 7, 2023 prevent people from understanding about ongoing pain and trauma across the last century?”
- “Is it possible to identify one single definitive point in history when violence and hostility began, or must we acknowledge the many key time points and the dynamics at all times even between key time points, that have contributed to this violence?”

People can tell quite different narratives depending on whether they choose to begin the story with Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, the Oslo Accords in 1993, the mass displacement of Palestinians in 1967, the Nakba in 1948, the British mandate in 1917, or other events, even as all of these and more are important to understanding this history and context. These are important dynamics to explore in understanding how history is manipulated in the service of manufacturing collective narratives and justifying violence. Hammack and Pilecki (2012) identify “narrative as a root metaphor for political psychology” because narratives are windows into our consciousness, and everything can be considered a narrative from movies and novels to textbooks and news media.

Hammack and Pilecki (2012) further argue that the same historic event, through divergent interpretations and reproduction of the cultural discourses, may become part of two completely different processes of making collective-memory. For example, while 2008 marks the sixtieth anniversary of national independence and victory for many Jewish Israeli people (Bar-On, 2006), it also marks the sixtieth anniversary of the loss of the dream of nationhood, the Nakba, also known as the catastrophe, for Palestinian people (Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007). Hammack and Pilecki (2012) ask how we can make sense of current events without an appreciation of how history is folded in the narratives people tell about themselves and their collectives.

Psychologists can play important roles in building this appreciation for the importance of narratives and in de-ideologizing and conscientización processes. They can do this by helping people to think critically about who is promoting and who benefits from different narratives about occupied Palestine and Israel, the range of evidence that contradicts and/or supports aspects of those different narratives, and alternative ways to build narratives that incorporate multiple diverse experiences and that support peace, justice, and well-being for all those impacted.

### ***Section 2: Resources for scholars engaging in the topics of war, violence, and genocide.***

One primary way psychologists can meaningfully engage in the ongoing violence in Gaza is through teaching and research scholarship. Critical approaches and applied social issues research in psychology and adjacent fields are especially well-suited for providing more comprehensive, as well as historically and contextually grounded, knowledge and analyses that are attuned to power dynamics on violence. As examples, liberation psychology (e.g., Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020; Martin-Baró, 1994), intersectionality (e.g., Cole, 2009; Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989;

Overstreet, Rosenthal, & Case, 2020), decolonial psychology (e.g., Comas-Díaz et al., 2024; Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective, 2022), transnational theories (e.g., postcolonial feminism; Haddock-Lazala, 2020; Patil, 2022; Puri, 2016), critical race theory (e.g., Crenshaw, 1995; Salter & Adams, 2013), the Queer of Color critique (e.g., Decena, 2011; Ferguson, 2004), and Disability justice (e.g., Berne et al., 2018; Brodt, 2023) are just some of the critical theories, frameworks, and approaches which can facilitate such multidisciplinary teaching and inquiry.

### **Key Terms: Nation, State, Nationalism**

Political and cultural theorists have helpfully distinguished many key terms that are often conflated in discussions of intergroup conflict. Consistent with strong psychological science and careful use of theory, we offer the following operationalizations drawn from Jyoti Puri (2011):

*Nationalism*: the belief that a people = a nation. Nationalism, according to Puri, is neither inherently good nor bad; it is an abstract idea that unifies groups and, consequently, separates us from others.

*Nation versus State*: Nations are unified and unique communities that exist within the boundaries of a sovereign space (states).

“The linking together of a nation and state, or the equation that a people = nation = state, is itself a modern artifact of nationalism” (Puri, 2011)

These approaches draw our attention to long-existing and ever-evolving systems, structures, and institutions that produce oppression, war, and other forms of violence and that shape people’s lived experiences and well-being. These approaches have been used to address white supremacy in its varied forms across time and place (e.g., anti-Jewish, anti-Arab, and anti-Muslim hate and violence carried out and justified by some Christian European, U.S., and other western leaders; institutional domination of people of European ancestry/white(r) people over Black and Brown people globally); colonialism (e.g., Britain’s and France’s expansion of their colonial rule after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918); imperialism and militarism (e.g., the U.S. and other dominant world powers engaging in and supporting wars and other means of control over resources and politics in the Middle East); and capitalism (e.g., profit earned from the war industry by manufacturing and selling weaponry and benefiting from continual war and suffering). These approaches help students and scholars recognize how these oppressive systems are deeply intertwined and best analyzed and understood together. They center the experiences, perspectives, and needs of oppressed peoples, including those with multiple intersecting ways of being stigmatized, who are often excluded from, or in other ways marginalized in research and teaching curricula.

These frameworks also help focus on resistance to these harmful systems and provide opportunities to imagine liberation and alternative futures that honor and support the humanity and well-being of all people. Applying these approaches helps hold the nuances and complexities of

collective and group identities, histories, and societies by focusing on the structural issues, avoiding individualization and compartmentalization, preventing utilization or promotion of stereotypes and overgeneralizations of groups in order to justify the status-quo, and holding up multiple truths that sometimes are framed in dominant media and society as being incompatible (e.g., Jews for Racial and Economic Justice's "[Vent Diagrams: Holding Contradicting Truths about Israel-Palestine](#)"). By using these approaches, for example, we are able to explain that not all Palestinian people are Muslim, not all Israeli people are Jewish, not all Jewish people are white/of European descent, and intersecting identities like social class, gender, ability—in addition to nationality, religion, and race—shape people's experiences and perspectives in relation to this violence simultaneously.

While the above-mentioned critical theories, frameworks, and approaches are especially well-suited to studying this topic, there is still much notable resistance and a range of challenges to applying these approaches in the field of psychology and beyond (e.g., Grzanka & Cole, 2021; Settles et al., 2020). And, while some psychological and other academic work related to occupied Palestine and Israel has applied these approaches, much of the research on this topic has not done so.

In a recent review of experimental social psychology research on the Palestine/Israel context, Hakim et al. (2023) applied decolonial theory and documented the tendencies of research in mainstream social psychology journals to refer to this context as an "intractable conflict" rather than an occupation; to flatten power asymmetries; to focus more on feelings and attitudes than material issues; to mostly include Jewish-Israeli participants; and to be conducted mostly by researchers affiliated with Israeli universities. Even the phrase "intractable conflict" reflects a tendency to dehistoricize—or abdicate psychologists' responsibility to contextualize their findings—reflecting a tendency to frame the conflict as so epically *long* that it is inevitable and ontologically never-ending. These patterns highlight some of the limits and weaknesses of existing research in this area, which can present structural violence as a conflict on equal footing, erasing crucial historical and material factors. This is also an example of what decolonial psychologists have called "racism of the zero-point"—a tendency to construe racial conflict in a race-evasive manner (Malherbe et al., 2021).

Acknowledging these issues in the literature, below we summarize some of the existing psychological and interdisciplinary research on this topic, which uses a range of approaches, has a variety of strengths and weaknesses, and, with careful interpretation, can be helpful to inform future research and teaching on this issue.

The social psychological literature on Palestinian and Israeli people often mirrors the longstanding and complex history within and between the two groups, occasionally contributing to the discourses of "conflict," "two-sides," and "intractability," and reproducing monolithic accounts of each people. However, the Israeli/Palestinian paradigm has emerged as a valuable case study in numerous subfields in social psychology literature, from intergroup social perceptions to prejudice reduction interventions (e.g., Arnd-Linder, Harel-Shalev, & Daphna-Tekoah, 2018; Brenick et al., 2024; Berger et al., 2018; Moore & Aweiss, 2002), helping pave the way for peace psychology

(e.g., Gawerc, 2016; Sauders, 2011) and leading to promising interventions for stereotyping and prejudice reduction.

Misperceptions and/or stereotypes of outgroups are often identified as important psychological mechanisms linked to stigma, intergroup bias, conflict, and war (e.g., Allport, 1954; Link & Phelan, 2001; White, 1977). People are exposed to stereotypes of outgroups from a range of social influences, of which the media is an important source (e.g., Brenick et al., 2007; Haslam, 1997; Mastro, 2015). Children are also exposed to polarizing depictions of the other in their textbooks and curriculum (Adwan et al., 2016). Critical perspectives and analyses of stereotypes highlight that stereotypes have often been purposefully created and promoted by those in institutional positions of power to justify inequity, oppression, and violence against members of stigmatized groups (e.g., Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Jost et al., 2004; Fanon, 1952/1986; Opatow, 1990; Young et al., 2023).

An example of these stereotypes and narratives is news coverage of the present violence, which may be guided by institutional bias in terms of what is covered and what language is used in that coverage. Was a victim of violence *killed* by an identifiable party, or did they simply *die* from vague or unknown sources? Recent analyses have shown that western media outlets create a narrative where Palestinians—in using a passive framing that obscures the actors and actions that killed them—are people *who died* or *were feared dead*, whereas Israeli deaths are characterized more actively as “brutal cold-blooded murder” (Inceoğlu, 2023).

Opatow (1990) identifies how stigma and stereotyping, such as that described above, play a role in the process of moral exclusion. Moral exclusion takes place when people believe an outgroup is “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply” (p.1). Once a group is excluded from another’s “scope of justice,” violent treatment of those who belong to the stigmatized group is understood by some as justified. The process of dehumanization is commonly used as a derogatory moral exclusion tactic in order to justify violence (see Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). For example, Israel’s defense minister’s recent statements about the conflict, “we are fighting animals, not people” (Times of Israel, 2023), dehumanizes Palestinians in the process of justifying violence against them.

In an older analysis of stereotyping and misperceptions among Palestinian and Israeli people as challenges to peace, White (1977) identified that some Palestinians perceived Israelis as a “growing cancer” and as “non-human,” and some Israelis viewed Palestinians as “criminals, murderers” who “don’t want peace” and “are obsessed with their determination to destroy [Israelis].” Palestinian and Israeli children as young as 4 years old perceive the other as “Godless” who “kills my people,” and “throws us out of our land” (Bar-tal, 1989; Brenick et al., 2007). In a micro-analysis of collective hatred, Yanay (2002) reviewed 200 letters containing hate speech toward left-wing Israeli individuals of the Civil Rights Movement who supported a Palestinian State and experienced aggression as a means to force conformity or unity of opinion within Israeli society. Yanay’s (2002) interpretation of this was that misperception of outgroup members and outgroup hate led to increased pressure to conform to ingroup beliefs in this context, as they also do in some other contexts. Moreover, in a qualitative, interview-based study, which assessed



injustice for Arab-Israeli<sup>2</sup> and Jewish-Israeli students in Haifa, Arab-Israeli students were more than twice as likely to report that injustice took place on university campuses, in great part attributed to *discrimination* rather than to *characteristics of individual actors*, which is what Jewish-Israelis were more likely to attribute for the injustices they faced (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2003).

In many cases, the misperception and intergroup hate between some Palestinian people and some Israeli people stems from varying social identification, divergent narratives, and differing policy endorsements and approaches to conflict resolution (e.g., Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2003; Moore & Aweiss, 2002; Wagner, 2006). With regard to social identity, in an analysis of attitudes among Jewish- and Arab-Israeli individuals and Palestinian individuals, hatred toward outgroups was greatly impacted by religiosity, strength of national identity, security issues, and political ideology. This work revealed that the most hated outgroups identified in this study for each party were settlers for Palestinian participants and Jewish-Israeli participants, Orthodox Jewish people for Arab-Israeli participants, and Arab people for Jewish-Israeli participants (Moore & Aweiss, 2002). Further, the salience of national (Arab) or civic (Palestinian) identities was found to be associated with less support for the peace process (Moore & Aweiss, 2002). Atop the foundation of social identification, diverging narratives commonly endorsed by members of different groups can also lead to injustice and increased intergroup tension and conflict (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2003).

Regarding policy, activism, and engagement, some Israeli and Palestinian approaches draw a line in the sand, maintaining the enmity between parties. Cohen and colleagues (2005) outlined the impact of *terror management theory* and *mortality salience* on the political climate during the 2004 election between George W. Bush- and John Kerry-primed voters who ultimately chose the incumbent (Bush) in light of potential post-9/11 security concerns. Building on the literature of *mortality salience*, acknowledgement of one's impending death or fleeting life, *terror management theory* says that all individuals seek to survive despite their acute awareness of the inevitability of death, which can occur for reasons outside of one's own control or expectation (Cohen et al., 2005). In a parallel to Cohen et al.'s findings concerning the impact of mortality salience and terror management theory on U.S. presidential elections in 2004, post-the second intifada and post-October 7, some Israelis have continued to support the right-wing political actors, in part due to their advocacy for military action, settlements, and occupation in favor of national security (Sayigh, 1997).

Further compounding the influence of mortality threat within Israeli society, *existential threat*—collective concern for a group's future existence due to a perceived or existing physical threat, originating from generational memory from the Holocaust, the Alhambra Decree of Sephardic Jews, and persecution in the diaspora—increases intergroup anxiety, mistrust, and aggression toward outgroup members for perceived self-preservation (Klar, Schori-Eyal, & Klar, 2013). Although research in terror management theory makes some predictions on the role of threat and its effect on relevant political beliefs, other research makes similar predictions under a different conceptual framework. Specifically, work by Jost et al.'s motivated social cognition framework (2003; 2017) infers that situational (but also dispositional) threat can push people to be more

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<sup>2</sup> "Arab-Israeli" is one of several terms that may refer to Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship.

supportive of political conservatism through affect (primarily fear and anxiety) and motivations (existential, epistemic, etc.).

Additional work disputes some aspects of Jost's and terror management theory researchers' scholarship on the nature of the effect and the role of emotion. For example, work by Lambert et al. (2010) and Huddy and Feldman (2011) indicates important clarifications and caveats for these prior findings. First, Lambert et al. (2010) show through four studies that the effect of the terrorist threat committed on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 shifted attitudes towards political leaders in the USA (specifically then-President George W. Bush), a finding that exemplifies the "rally 'round the flag" hypothesis (Mueller, 1973). More specifically, however, the shifts that did occur were mostly constrained to political beliefs that were *relevant* to the threat at hand (e.g., pro-war attitudes) and *not* other political beliefs (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights).

Other research validates the relative narrowness of these shifts through polling data of United States citizens (Huddy & Feldman, 2011) collected around the time of the 9/11 attacks. Beyond the relative narrowness of these effects, these researchers also showed that anger was the emotion most centrally responsible for these shifts, implying that the justice-restoration component from the 9/11 attacks drew people to support aggressive military attitudes motivated by vengeance towards those committing the attacks. This anger-based finding has also been found in other correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental work (Lambert et al., 2019; Skitka et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2003; Vasilopoulous et al., 2019).

Since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, several notable Palestinian resistance groups have formed, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). Resistance activities, including the development of these groups, come in a variety of forms but often share similar inciting factors: (1) adverse physical circumstances for one or one's family that appear unsustainable, (2) perceived lack of security and unattenuated fear, (3) the need for self-determination for one's group or territory, and (4) recognition and respect for one's social identity (Wagner, 2006). Wagner (2006) further demonstrates that traditional military responses to acts of violent resistance—sometimes termed terrorism—only increase group recruitment and do not deter violent activity.

In the case of the October 7 attacks and their aftermath, increased Israeli military campaigns in Gaza should be expected to drive increases in Hamas recruitment rather than diminish numbers of Hamas fighters, despite Israel's declared mission to eliminate Hamas (Jobain, Federman, & Jeffery, 2024; see Wagner, 2006). Specifically, for Israelis, Bar-Tal and colleagues (2007) demonstrates that there is a negative relationship between collective fear and support for the peace process, which plays a critical role in political decision-making based on factors, such as mortality salience and existential threat. Despite the negative impacts of social cognitive forces on increased intergroup understanding, realistic empathy between parties from Palestine and Israel—on which these individuals could slowly develop trust—will lend itself toward developing a sustainable and lasting peace as long as core issues are addressed (Wagner, 2006).

In an exploratory qualitative interview study applying an intersectional framework, Nazzal, Stringfellow, and Maclean (2024) further complicate understandings of Palestinian resistance with their focus on Palestinian women activists, who have played crucial roles in resistance organizing but are often left out of research and analysis on the topic. Nazzal et al.'s (2024) analysis of interviews with 43 Palestinian women activists highlights the interconnected nature of gender, class, and settler-colonial, among other forms of oppression and domination in shaping these women's experiences with activism, including specifically repression enacted by the Palestinian Security Forces (PSF), which has cooperating ties to (e.g., receiving funding and training from) Israel and the U.S.

With an anti-colonial, decolonial, and intersectional analysis drawing on interviews with members of the Palestinian Youth Movement, a transnational organization led by young Palestinian people living both in Palestine and in diaspora around the globe, Salih, Zambelli, and Welchman (2021) highlight how activists' focus on Palestinian liberation is often built in coalition with struggles for liberation worldwide, given contexts of ongoing pervasive colonial, racial-capitalist power inequities and violence. Relatedly, Atallah and Dutta (2022) utilize decolonial theory and praxis, "weaving together stories of refusal and community" from their grandparents and ancestors in the contexts of Palestine and India in order to bring these stories from different contexts "into conversation with each other, ...disrupt violent, colonially-configured borders..." and allow "for the revisioning of justice as irresistible and interlinked, ungovernable and in defiance of borders and walls" (p. 434).

While it is critical for teachers and researchers to document and understand factors contributing to stereotyping, hatred, violence, and oppression within occupied Palestine and Israel, as well as their consequences, it is also imperative to address and understand the potential for positive dynamics, such as contributors to intergroup solidarity, empathy, collaborative collective action for peace, and resilience. For instance, mindfulness has more recently been applied in community- and education-based interventions and shows promise in promoting social justice driven empathy, care, and resilience (Berger et al., 2018; Waelde et al., 2019).

Taking another approach, Arnd-Linder and colleagues (2018) interviewed and analyzed narratives of Palestinian women from the West Bank and Gaza, Arab-Israeli women, and Jewish-Israeli women, finding that women from all of these backgrounds expressed empathy for and interest in getting to know individuals from the "other side" better, even as they expressed their unique challenges and frustrations. This evidence challenges the "intractable conflict" characterization that is common in research and social discourse more broadly. Researchers documenting the work and experiences of Palestinian and Israeli activists involved in collaborative peace- and justice-building organizations highlighted that even previous soldiers/combatants and those who have lost close family members can work cooperatively toward peace and justice in the region and toward collective identity construction (e.g., Gawerc, 2016; Sauders, 2011). Ultimately, Bar-Tal (2004) illustrated that true co-existence between Israeli and Palestinian peoples requires equal treatment, providing a premise to improve future relations.

All attempts to address intergroup conflict and intervention to promote intergroup relations should be understood as context-dependent and historically contingent. As such, psychologists should

not assume that past interventions are appropriate in the current moment and context. Nonetheless, some prior research suggests the efficacy of a range of intergroup approaches to enhance empathy and perspective-taking, as well as reduce hostility between groups--elements of which may be useful here and now. Working to improve intergroup relations, Ben-Ari (2004) evaluated the three most comprehensive and tested social psychological models and their approaches to reduce conflict between Palestinians and Israelis: (1) the Contact Model (increased intergroup contact will improve positive attitudes toward outgroup members), (2) the Information Model (reduction in prejudice by improving the information communicated through the media and through education), and (3) the Metacognitive Model (development of an intergroup “metacognitive awareness”), which all apply unique perspectives to conflict reduction and coexistence.

Education is one avenue through which co-existence has been explored with the collaboration of Jewish-Israeli, Arab-Israeli, and Palestinian students to reduce prejudice and to increase partnership through cooperative schooling systems (Adwan et al., 2016; Bar-Tal, 2004). For example, Bekerman and Horenczyk (2004) conducted a two-year longitudinal study in two coexistence schools in Israel, focusing on bilingual, namely Hebrew and Arabic, education as a promising method for improving intergroup contact, exchange, and understanding. Berger and colleagues implemented a supplementary cooperative educational intervention in which young Palestinian Citizens of Israel and Jewish-Israeli children attended a bilingual intergroup arts education program at the Arab Jewish Community Center in Tel Aviv-Yafo. Participants demonstrated increased empathy, compassion (Brenick et al., 2019; 2024), and willingness for contact with outgroup peers. They also demonstrated decreased emotional prejudice, expectations about negative outgroup behaviors, and stereotyping (Berger et al., 2018).

After reviewing six coexistence education programs during the early 2000s, Abu-Nimer (2004) provided a set of clear recommendations to ensure the success of a coexistence program given the context, including an environment where both parties are treated as equals in respect and in resources. Factors for success for programs were 1) an environment where each party recognizes their group’s role in the conflict, 2) a budget which is carefully derived from trusted sources by both parties and allows the program to maintain autonomy from government influence, and 3) the use of psychology in implementing interventions and long-term solutions to complex issues within the conflict, allowing both parties to cope and heal.

Intertwined with coexistence education is the understanding of Israeli and Palestinian people’s narratives, which have diverged over decades of ongoing violence, particularly due to the ethno-political socialization of young children who attach differing narratives, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions associated with the conflict to their own group as well as to the outgroup (Nasie, Reifer Tagar, & Bar-Tal, 2021). In addition, recent research on revenge by Eadeh et al. (2017) indicates a bittersweet affective component, indicating negative emotional experiences from any act of revenge (see also Carlsmith et al., 2008), along with feelings of justice restoration after the act. For these reasons, it’s quite likely that revenge is likely to be contributing to escalations of violence within Israel/Palestine.

To counter these sociocultural development processes, a collective narrative between Palestinian and Israeli people, incorporating the lived experiences of both groups, can be leveraged in a coexistence, prejudice-reduction solution (Adwan et al., 2016; Salomon, 2004). In one such intervention, Israeli and Palestinian students shared personal stories from their lives and families and were expected to share some of the stories/narratives that they heard from outgroup members with a parent or grandparent. The goal of this one-year program was to improve understanding of outgroup narratives and to reassess stories/narratives that they have been told from individuals of their own group (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004). Further extending to individuals who experience the conflict vicariously, when Arab Americans and Jewish Americans endorsed respective narratives of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict which reinforced Palestinian and Israeli perspectives only, they were less likely to endorse a two-state solution (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2019). However, when Jewish Americans were able to also understand the Palestinian narrative that Palestinians were a peoples dispossessed of their land, and when Arab Americans were able to engage the perspective of Israelis in their narrative of living peacefully but defending their nation, both groups were more likely to support the two-state solution (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2019). Taken together, bridging the gaps between narratives maintained by parties in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict will increase intergroup empathy and understanding as well as reduce the propensity for violence.

With consideration to their context, strengths, weakness, and limitations, the research and frameworks shared above are a valuable starting point for teachers instructing on Israel and Gaza as well as researchers seeking to expand the literature through their own academic contributions. In the following sections, we provide some additional guidance for scholars wishing to responsibly engage with the present violence in Gaza in their research and teaching.

### **Pursuits of Academic Research**

Ensuring that the voices of those most directly affected or harmed by the violence are centered is an essential component of research that seeks to document—and alleviate—harm and injustice. For example, critical participatory action research is an epistemology that includes individuals who are most marginalized and impacted by an issue being studied as critical experts (regardless of academic/research-related training) in making decisions about all aspects of research, including what research questions and methods are most important to address, how to analyze and interpret data, and how to utilize results to make positive social change toward justice and healing (e.g., Fine & Torre, 2019).

The perspectives of historically excluded groups in psychology are essential to develop methods and approaches for studying elements of violence and its reverberating effects. Also essential are theories from non-Western, non-White, and non-Christian groups, which can account for dynamics that might otherwise be pathologized or distorted by dominant, mainstream, and Eurocentric/U.S.-centric theory. Further, because so many of the mainstream psychological measurement tools were developed and normed on populations outside of the Middle East, specifically with people not of Arab, Jewish or Muslim descent, many of these tools will not suffice in addressing the multidimensional dynamics and consequences of the violence. Therefore, qualitative, mixed, and non-dominant methods may be better suited for psychological inquiry with these populations, particularly in times of intense suffering, pain, resistance, and resilience. Participatory work with

members of these groups will best inform the development of new and/or adaptation of existing measures to appropriately address these populations' experiences and needs.

For those who have not previously conducted relevant research and are interested in pursuing this area of work, it is necessary to balance the urgency of the current situation with the importance of being thoughtful and intentional in the process. Too much haste increases the chances of inadvertently reproducing harm. It is indeed critical for psychologists to engage the issue(s) more than we have in the past. However, the urgency of the present crisis should not supersede the kind of critical care that is essential to engage in work related to such profound trauma and vulnerability for so many people and groups in Gaza, all of Palestine/Israel, and around the world. We do not assert this to discourage scholars from engaging in this work. Rather, this serves as a reminder to be both thoughtful and deliberate, engaging with and building upon the work of existing experts, particularly those with connections to the ongoing conflict or who are at risk of being marginalized by new (or underdeveloped) voices and perspectives.

### **Teaching with Care & Bravery**

Some educators may have opportunities to teach courses or hold educational seminars/events specifically focused on occupied Palestine and Israel, such as a pop-up or elective course, which could include collaborations with colleagues in other fields to provide interdisciplinary perspectives to students. But for those who do not have these more focused opportunities, it is still possible to teach about, reference, and discuss the topic within other existing courses. As examples for those teaching in undergraduate and graduate psychology programs, a social psychology course could include content about Palestine/Israel on a particular week focused on this issue specifically, or in the context of a week focused on intergroup relations, prejudice, aggression and violence, or peace. A psychopathology and/or health psychology course could include content about the mental and/or physical health consequences of experiencing war-related trauma, including the mental and physical health of Palestinians in Gaza as well as all Palestinian and Israeli people. A developmental psychology course could include content about consequences of experiencing war-related trauma and being exposed to different messages and narratives about the region's history for children's development in Palestine and Israel. A course need not be about Israel and Palestine directly to expose students to literature on the subject.

In any teaching context, using ground rules and approaches to discussing difficult issues, current events, diversity, and social justice in educational settings can be helpful for teaching and facilitating discussions about Palestine/Israel (e.g., Kite, Case, & Williams, 2021; Pickering, 2021). Some considerations that may be particularly important for this topic can be: making sure not to conflate and instead to carefully distinguish between people versus governments, militaries, and organizations (the actions of which very often do not reflect many people's attitudes or desires, even if that is being claimed); holding empathy and compassion for the varied forms of direct and indirect/vicarious intergenerational and recent/current trauma that are present and being activated/triggered for people; addressing different terms and ways of discussing and referring to what is happening about which people may have different preferences and reactions to, and can mean very different things to different people; making efforts to prevent (e.g., by setting specific ground rules) and address (e.g., "call in") anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Jewish (as well as any/all

stigmatizing) comments or other microaggressions, while still appreciating that people can say and do hurtful things inadvertently.

It can also be helpful to consult with colleagues and draw on guidance from existing and developing resources for teaching about occupied Palestine and Israel (e.g., Zinn Education Project's "[Teaching about the violence in Palestine and Israel](#)"; American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African Psychological Association- Student Committee's webinar "[How to Talk About Palestine: Allyship for the MENA Community](#)"), as well as resources for supporting and mentoring students who may be directly and/or indirectly impacted by the recent escalation of violence (e.g., American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African Psychological Association's "[Guidelines for working with and supporting Arab/MENA students](#)").

Scholarship is one of the primary ways psychologists can engage with the ongoing violence in Gaza. By teaching the next generation of citizens, scholars, activists, and voters, and by conducting new original research that expands understanding of the conflict, psychologists can help inform the public on the various frameworks and evidence relevant to the situation in Israel and Palestine, potentially shedding light on future pathways to peace and justice. That being said, we recognize that untenured and non-tenure-track academics, as well as academics who occupy various marginalized or stigmatized social positions may be at far greater risk to unfair punishment, harassment, and sanction for addressing these issues and content in the classroom. Instructors should, of course, do this work only with careful calculation regarding their own structural vulnerability.

Psychologists also have another role unique among academic scholars, and that is as therapists and clinicians working with individuals directly and indirectly impacted by this violence. The next section includes recommendations for responsible engagement with clients and patients discussing the present Israel/Palestine situation in their treatment.

### ***Section 3: Approaches for Psychotherapy & Clinical Work***

Though social psychologists comprise the largest constituency of SPSSI members, many others conduct clinical work or teach in clinically oriented programs (e.g., APA-accredited programs in clinical, counseling, and school psychology). Given the transnational fallout from the present violence in Gaza, as well as intergenerational trauma and harm (see above), psychologists should be prepared to address issues related to Israel, Palestine, antisemitism, and Islamophobia, as well as other connected issues (e.g., xenophobia, gendered racism, heterosexism, etc.) in clinical work.

On the one hand, this work is unexceptional inasmuch as all responsible psychologists should be prepared to encounter harms from complex geopolitical issues in clinical encounters. On the other hand, the heightened urgency and political strife over the present conflict may warrant continuing education and consciousness-raising to better prepare clinicians to provide supportive, affirmative, and culturally responsive care to those suffering directly or indirectly from ongoing violence in Palestine and Israel.

Despite the cacophony of reductionist news media coverage on Palestine and Israel, as well as pervasive cultural antisemitism and Islamophobia, psychologists should not make assumptions about the political orientations of clients based on clients' ethnic, racial, and religious identities, such that they assume all Jewish clients are pro-Israel and all Arab clients are anti-Israel. Moreover, not all people of Arab descent or from Palestine are Muslim and not all Israeli people and their descendants are Jewish. To combat assumptions and stereotyping, psychotherapists might explore and interrogate their own anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Jewish biases in anticipation of difficult conversations with clients around the war, recognizing that we are all taught these things (to different degrees) in our socialization and education. As Weber Cannon (1990) helpfully reminds us, taking responsibility for unlearning problematic ideas/ideology is not the same as personally accepting blame for the origination of these ideas, which all precede us. Rather, it is about committing to learn otherwise.

Psychologists can and should wrestle with questions of “broaching” and engage other psychologists and mental health care providers around the ethics of dealing with these kinds of complex, sensitive political and cultural issues in the therapy context, and when training future psychologists (Grzanka, 2020; Grzanka, Gonzalez, & Spanierman, 2019). Fortunately, there are many helpful guides and frameworks, even if psychotherapy (as an institution) has much more to do addressing political dynamics between therapists and clients. Cultural humility (Buchanan et al., 2020), structural competency (Metzl & Hansen, 2014), and intersectionality-informed feminist multicultural therapy (Adames et al., 2023; French et al., 2020) are some helpful starting points, and all draw upon radical traditions to a greater or lesser extent (e.g., liberation psychology; Comas-Díaz, 2020). Something these traditions share is a recognition that information alone is not the key to effective healing. Compassionate, culturally affirmative care is dependent upon therapists' capacity to recognize what they do not know so that they can demonstrate empathy and humility with clients (Buchanan et al., 2020). Cultural humility in the therapeutic working alliance then reflects not a need to share the same knowledge or experiences but a sensitivity to the relations of power that result in unequal dynamics in therapy and virtually all domains of social life.

Intersectional cultural humility (Buchanan et al., 2020) and structural competency (Metzl & Hansen, 2014) are indispensable theoretical orientations for doing this kind of clinical work. However, in terms of further consciousness-raising and awareness-enhancing, there is much psychotherapists can do to prepare themselves for work with clients who need to process vicarious trauma, intersectional oppression, and various forms of harm that emanate from the historical and present conflict in Israel and Palestine. In addition to the resources above, interested psychologists may consult Dr. Devin Atallah and colleagues (“May Fly Collective”) *CURCUM's Trees: A Decolonial Healing Guide for Palestinian Community Health Workers* and professor and writer Hala Alyan's writing on the importance of grappling with dehumanizing messaging and the role of “witnessing” in the present conflict.

Just as the violence in Gaza cannot be solved in the classroom alone, it also cannot be solved in the therapy room. But by challenging biases, practicing cultural humility, and utilizing



interdisciplinary resources, psychotherapists can help their clients address the psychological repercussions of the ongoing and traumatic violence.

For those psychologists who wish to engage with the political and policy circumstances that contribute to the ongoing violence in Gaza, there may be appropriate times to step out of the office, classroom, and therapy room and engage in more direct policy advocacy. This next and final section reviews resources and strategies for those applying psychological research and concepts in a policy setting.

#### **Section 4: Resources of psychologists engaging in policy and advocacy efforts**

There are many ways that psychologists individually and collectively can engage in advocacy and activism to try to influence policies relevant to Gaza, all of Palestine/Israel, and the Middle East more broadly, as well as inter-related issues. SPSSI's general advocacy/policy resources offer information, support, and strategies for using science to advocate for social change. This can be useful when engaging with government entities as well as with other institutions where policies are made, such as universities, health care settings, government offices, businesses, and private practices. In these settings, psychologists and social scientists are well positioned to use their skills, expertise, and research to inform complex controversies about and approaches to addressing the war (e.g., Albhaisi, 2022). SPSSI's resources can help such scholars connect their expertise to ongoing policy conversations, wherever they may be taking place.

The specific policies psychologists may advocate for will vary depending on the contexts in which they live (e.g., which institutions, governments, organizations they work in or are constituents of), the shifting dynamics happening over time, and their own positionalities, among other factors. Yet, in any context, at any time, and from any positionality, the broad base of relevant evidence from social issues research in psychology and interdisciplinary fields (some of which is reviewed above) can guide and support effective advocacy. Some examples of mechanisms through which psychologists can advocate on relevant policies, include writing and/or signing petitions, emailing and/or calling policymakers, writing op-eds, writing policy briefs, attending protests, boycotting/divesting, and supporting, collaborating with, and/or participating in organizations working toward peace and justice in the region.

Since many social issues that are inter-connected with this present violence, psychologists can also support and engage in activism and advocacy in relation to Gaza and all of Palestine/Israel from many angles with organizations and movements that have other areas of focus (e.g., peace/anti-war, Black Lives Matter and other anti-racist, human rights, environmentalist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, feminist, reproductive justice, decolonization, and other movements). In doing this work, it is important to recognize that, although definitions of peace in western countries are often simply about absence of physical violence, definitions of peace in the Global South/Majority World often include equity and justice, including equitable access to resources (Dalley et al., 2013; Galtung, 1996; Page et al., 2013).

Given the current climate in many places, an important way psychologists can advocate is to support people's right to speak up and protest, for which SPSSI's existing advocacy work in

support of academic freedom can provide useful resources. Indeed, SPSSI has a long history of connection to the issues of freedom of speech and repression: SPSSI intervened in 1939 in an academic freedom case involving one of our founders; and, during the McCarthy Era— which many have drawn connections to with current repression of activists in support of Palestinians—the first and third presidents of SPSSI were investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, with detrimental impacts on their careers and lives. Specific actions can include advocating for policies within universities and other institutions where psychologists work and learn to support people's rights to speak up and protest.

Related is advocacy against institutional actions and policies that are aiming to suppress and silence activists and organizers advocating for Palestinian people, which have been ongoing long before and have also been heightened since Oct. 7th, 2023. This can also include supporting individuals and organizations who are being doxed—a form of harassment that involves exposing an individual's personally identifiable or private information online—and otherwise personally attacked for their activism by sharing anti-doxing resources (e.g., Equality Labs' Anti-Doxing Guide for Activists), writing and/or signing petitions or letters, or protesting in support of those individuals and organizations. Relatedly, interested psychologists can uplift and share the important work of activists/organizers, journalists, and others doing justice- and peace-building work in Gaza, all of Palestine/Israel, and other places around the world, who are not typically given mainstream media attention and are often actively suppressed or even killed for their work.

With any approaches one may take to advocacy and activism, one can draw on critical frameworks discussed earlier, including insights from intersectionality, which is rooted in Black feminist activism and organizing at the intersections of multiple systems of power and oppression (e.g., Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990). Intersectionality can also inform advocacy and activism by clarifying the intertwined nature of all systems of oppression and social movements for justice and liberation; centering the importance of coalition-building and collaborations among activists, organizations, and social movements; and highlighting that the freedom and liberation of all oppressed peoples are not at odds with each other but rather are intertwined (e.g., Cole, 2008; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Davis, 2016). This requires being reflective about and strategizing around one's own positionalities in relation to the issue, working on one's own potential biases that could, without intention, lead to harming others, and utilizing any forms of access to power and privilege one may have to influence policies and institutions (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2020; Cole, 2008; Ellison & Langhout, 2020).

SPSSI has an 85+ year history of supporting peace and anti-war as well as peace-building efforts. For example, in our Armistice Day Statement in 1937 (later published in the January 1938 SPSSI newsletter), SPSSI wrote, "War is not inevitable, psychologically. It is not of 'human nature.' It is fought by men who often do not know why they are fighting, doing things which are repulsive to them but which they have been told they must do. It can be prevented. If we learn how to discount the propaganda of war makers, and how to insist upon the peaceable adjustment of international conflicts, (as we have upon the peaceable adjustment of individual conflicts), there is no psychological reason for wars to continue."

Consistent with this organizational history; calls from global leaders, including the United Nations Security Council (2024); the majority public opinion in the U.S. (Data for Progress, 2023) and many places around the world; and growing calls from psychology and other academic organizations; SPSSI urges policymakers to support: an immediate and permanent ceasefire and cessation of war and violence in Gaza, all of Palestine/Israel, and the Middle East more broadly; the release of all political prisoners/detainees/hostages; the provision of humanitarian aid, resources, and logistical support to address the material and psychological damage; and sincere efforts toward lasting peace and justice in the region.

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