

Move this Psychotherapy Conference from Jerusalem: Notes on an International Campaign of Protest

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This “note” comprises an introductory piece written by Andrew Samuels which gives the background to the campaign, a letter of response from Dr Mark Widdowson, and a rejoinder to this by the original group that had taken the initiative.

THE INITIATIVE

On 2 March, 2016, the London newspaper *The Independent* published a letter in both its online editions protesting at the decision of the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR) to locate its 2016 conference in Jerusalem.

A small group of psychotherapists were concerned that those publicizing the Conference had taken the opportunity to promote a view of Jerusalem that was inaccurate and intended to obscure a situation that might give rise to serious misgivings amongst those considering attending the Conference. They circulated an e-mail to test the opinion of colleagues in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) and drafted the text of an open letter of protest for professionals in the field to sign.

From the UK-Palestine Mental Health Network (ukpalmhn@gmail.com)

Dear Colleague

We are a group of US- and UK-based psychotherapists, including current and former members of the Society for Psychotherapy Research, who are unhappy that the organisation is planning to hold its 2016 conference in Jerusalem. Some private letters of protest have been written to the SPR Executive, but these have not been dealt with seriously.

We have now composed a letter that we would encourage you to read, and sign. Our intention is to gather a significant number of signatories, all of them mental health professionals, to indicate publicly our concern about this matter.

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Please sign this letter and also please distribute it, together with this covering note, as widely as possible. Send your full name, nationality and brief institutional and professional affiliations to UK-Palestine Mental Health Network: ukpalmhn@gmail.com

Best wishes

Stephen Botticelli, Ann D'Ercole, Irwin Z Hoffman, Nancy Hollander, Martin Kemp, Lynne Layton, Andrew Samuels, Allan Scholom, Stephen Soldz

The letter attracted 300 signatures from a range of countries, including 32 professors, 27 consultant doctors, and numerous psychotherapists, counsellors and analysts. Many prominent professionals working in the psychotherapy and allied fields in Palestine/Occupied Territories/Gaza signed the letter.

Move this Conference away from Jerusalem

We, psychotherapists, researchers and other mental health professionals, write to express our dismay at the decision of the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR) to hold its next international conference in Jerusalem.

Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories, including house demolitions, movement restrictions and imprisonment without trial, cause insecurity, despair, helplessness and humiliation. They create family tension and widespread traumatisation, and disrupt child attachment. The calamitous impact of Israel's occupation on the psychological health of the Palestinians is well documented.

This conference would be taking place a short walking distance from neighbourhoods where Palestinians are currently being dispossessed of their homes to make way for Israeli settlements, one among many strategies that pose a threat to their very survival in Jerusalem. SPR's collective denial – or indifference – is evident in the Conference publicity published on its website. Jerusalem is here pictured as “a city suspended between heaven and earth, East and West, past and present – parallel universes of flowing caftans and trendy coffee shops”.

We are shocked that, replying to concerns already raised, the organisers consider it adequate to promise to assist Palestinian psychotherapy researchers to attend the Conference. This may ease SPR consciences but it is as nothing weighed against the political message they will be sending by meeting in this beleaguered city.

SPR's name ought to be synonymous with intellectual honesty, independence, and a courageous resolve to deal with the truth. Hence we call for the Conference to be moved to another venue, following the lead given by the World Association of Infant Mental Health in similar circumstances.

The letter and list of signatories may be found on the website of *The Independent*: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-it-s-not-the-friends-of-the-eu-who-peddle-fear-a6905821.html>

An interesting discussion of the issues conducted by e-mail between the President of the Society for Psychotherapy Research and Jews for Justice for Palestinians may be found at: <http://jffjp.com/?p=80962>].

A summary of the matter written by Steven Botticelli, one of the signatories of the original letter requesting signatures, may be found at: <http://mondoweiss.net/2016/03/psychotherapists-organize-to-oppose-holding-professional-associations-annual-meeting-in-jerusalem/>

The Conference took place in June 2016.

RESPONSE

MARK WIDDOWSON, University of Salford, Salford, UK

Although I am a member of the local committee of the UK chapter of the SPR, I am writing this piece purely in a personal capacity and not on behalf of the SPR, or the SPR UK Chapter.

I was disappointed by the letter from Andrew Samuels and colleagues about SPR's decision to hold their annual conference in Israel.

Whilst I was not party to the decision-making process in deciding to hold the Conference in Jerusalem, I know that at all levels within the SPR, and within the UK Chapter Committee that there was deep soul-searching about the political aspects of the choice to hold the Conference in Israel. The open letter appeared to me to suggest that the decision had been taken lightly, and without due consideration to the complex and difficult situation in both Jerusalem and the surrounding areas.

After some consideration, I chose to attend the Conference. Whilst I understand the arguments put forward by Samuels et al., I see the situation as complex and is one which has alternative arguments, and counter-positions, all of which are worthy of consideration. I see no advantage in taking polarized reactions to Israeli government policies, and believe that the best way forward is to account for and hold multiple arguments as equally valid within their own context.

The trend for anti-Israeli discourse is one which can easily give way to backdoor anti-Semitism, which can be "justified" under the pretext of condemnation of Zionism. As a psychotherapist, I am of the view that any argument which effectively demonises both state and its peoples can lead to polarization and a discounting of any valid argument within the opposing view, and can foreclose a deeper debate which promotes dialogue, insight and reconciliation. Furthermore, a Blanket academic boycott of Israel does not recognize diversity of opinion amongst Israeli academics who, as in many other countries, are arguably some of the most progressive and liberal voices in their country.

Whilst there is debate about the impact the academic boycott had on South Africa during the time of apartheid, I personally do not believe that it was effective in having any kind of significant effect on the ending of apartheid. Instead, I understand that at the time, many South African academics (including those who were critical of apartheid) felt isolated and collectively demonized, and I believe that an approach based on inclusion and dialogue would have been more effective and would have enabled those who did have critical views to be supported in expressing them and in gaining wider support. Furthermore, visiting a country is not the same as endorsing its government or policies. For example, if someone visits the UK, this does not mean that they are in support of Brexit or condone the British government's choice to leave the European Union. Equally, attending a conference in Israel, does not imply support of Israeli government policy, nor does it mean that individuals attending are in any way choosing to ignore the day-to-day realities experienced by many Palestinians.

My experience of the Conference was positive. Whilst there I encountered people of Jewish Israeli, Christian and Arab backgrounds and watched people interact with each other with ease and friendliness. I spoke to Israeli and Palestinian researchers and heard them present their research, which sometimes crossed the cultural and political divide between the two communities. For example, an Israeli academic presented her findings from her group work which supported Palestinian women who have children with attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

I appreciate that the interactions I had with these academics may have only been surface ones, and may not accurately reflect the realities of many people in Jerusalem or indeed in Israel and Palestinian authority administered areas. Instead, my experiences were one where different cultures managed to co-exist, and where people had found ways to work and live in peace. Certainly the atmosphere with the Conference was one whereby scientific endeavour, collaboration and co-operation were the main themes. The Conference venue was a non-denominational space, where all three religions were represented, but in terms of imagery and style, but also in staffing. Again, the theme of co-existence of cultures and perspectives was reflected here. The image which stands out most clearly in my mind is watching some of the waiters and waitresses— of Israeli and Arab backgrounds— quietly laughing together and enjoying each other's company whilst they patiently waited for the Conference delegates to break for lunch.

Sincerely,

Mark Widdowson

RESPONSE TO DR WIDDOWSON

STEVEN BOTTICELLI and ANN D'ERCOLE, New York University, New York, New York, USA

IRWIN Z. HOFFMAN, Chicago Center for Psychoanalysis, Chicago, Illinois, USA

NANCY CARO HOLLANDER, Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, San Francisco, California, USA

MARTIN KEMP, British Psychoanalytic Association, London, UK

LYNNE LAYTON, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

ANDREW SAMUELS, University of Essex, Colchester, UK; Society of Analytic Psychology, London, UK

This response to Dr Widdowson comes from the group of psychotherapists who initiated the letter of protest concerning the decision of the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR) to locate its 2016 conference in Jerusalem. We have endeavoured not to repeat any of the arguments and evidence that may be found in this collation.

We begin this brief response by noting that Dr Widdowson is of the opinion that the cultural boycott had “no significant effect” in bringing about political change in South Africa. This offers a point of orientation regarding his comments on our letter.

We are, of course, convinced that, where anti-Semitism exists, it must be countered in all possible ways, but the conflation of criticisms of Israeli government policies with anti-Semitism has been recognized widely and for some time as a fig leaf for those policies and their deleterious effects on Palestinians. The Israeli government works assiduously to encourage the view that anti-Zionism is the same as anti-Semitism.

The boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns stem from calls by Palestinians, including academics and mental health professionals, for such a campaign to be mounted. It is proving one of the very few non-violent political actions to have any impact on Israeli government policies. Incidentally, the Academic Boycott does not target individuals. It is applied only to institutions. This is precisely because of the important need to recognize that there are individual Israeli academics and professionals who dissent from their government's policies and to distinguish these individuals from academic and professional institutions with financial dependency on and uncritical collaboration with the Israeli state and its policies.

There was no demonization of Israel as a country in our letter or in the ample (and, we think, interesting) supporting documentation provided for readers of *Psychotherapy and Politics International*. Dr Widdowson does not refer to any of it.

In a way, Dr Widdowson makes many of our arguments for us. The very fact that he was himself conflicted about attending the Conference, given his political positions as revealed in his piece, says it all. It was a provocation to hold the Conference in Jerusalem, and inflammatory to refer to the city in the Conference literature as “the capital of Israel” – a position not held by any responsible government including that of the United States.

The example given of “an Israeli academic [who] presented her findings from her group work which supported Palestinian women who have children with attention deficit hyperactive disorder” is, of course, intended to show Israel in a good light. We respectfully suggest that the language in this segment of Dr Widdowson’s piece reveals colonial, if not more reprehensible attitudes.

We are glad that Dr Widdowson enjoyed his time at the Conference in Jerusalem. We found some of his depictions of conference life quite revealing. It is possible that he visited the Occupied Territories, or familiarized himself with the policies of property appropriations and removal of the Palestinian population taking place in Jerusalem to this day. It is equally possible that he engaged in discussions about the traumatic effects of Israeli government policies, or was aware of the imbalances of power that permeate professional, social, economic and family life in the region.

Our information about the Conference is that, whilst a few Israeli citizens of “Arab” background attended the Conference, very few Palestinian therapists and researchers did so. This was for a variety of reasons ranging from the lack of Palestinian representation in the planning of the Conference, to failure to obtain permission from the Israeli authorities to travel to Jerusalem (whether from the Occupied Territories and Gaza or from outside the region), to a rejection of the Conference on the part of the Palestinian mental health community. Such rejection was highlighted in our presentation of the matter, with special reference to the composition of the list of signatures.

Finally, we were very much aware that considerable “soul-searching” had gone on within the SPR, including within its UK chapter, about the wisdom of holding their conference in Jerusalem. Indeed, rather than just fire off an open letter, we wrote to the UK chapter of SPR (current and past presidents and website contact form) and, in reply, we were (twice) referred to the headquarters of the SPR in the States and we engaged at great length with the President. Some of the resultant dialogue may be found in the various links provided in the collation.

In addition, we had very extensive and constructive dialogue with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) which held its joint UK conference with the UK Chapter of SPR in May 2016. We wanted to raise our concerns about “Jerusalem” at this national UK conference. It was absolutely clear that the UK Chapter knew that these discussions were going on with BACP. The two organizations – BACP and SPR-UK – were, quite appropriately, in contact about our letter.

At the BACP-SPR-UK, as a result of our discussions with BACP, there was a special meeting on “politics and research” that focused on the SPR conference in Jerusalem. We do not know if your correspondent was there.

In conclusion, we would urge readers of this journal to make use of its on-line format and click on the links provided to get a more extensive sense of what has been going on. This journal is a

psychotherapy journal. The SPR is a *psychotherapy* organization. The small group who initiated the international letter of protest were – and are – all *psychotherapists*. The majority of those who signed our letter were *psychotherapists*. We are glad that this discussion is taking place here.

Steven Botticelli, Ann D’Ercole, Irwin Z. Hoffman, Nancy C. Hollander, Martin Kemp, Lynne Layton, and Andrew Samuels