

NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

Reflections after 15 months of war: Knowing there is suffering on a global scale, while holding in mind what I know as a therapist about trauma, healing, and reparation

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¹ The views expressed here are my own personal views.

ABSTRACT

Personal narratives help shape therapists, and their narratives are the lenses through which they see the world. The legacy of intergenerational war trauma is one such lens. Lenses and personal narratives are foundational to building knowledge and understanding, of events on a small and large scale, and this is a soft power of influence to be shared. Many therapists have lived experience of mental health difficulties, and consequently they are not immune from what they study.

Social realities are co-constructed, and we are all active participants in building peaceful alternatives for generations to come. An agenda of nationalism is being forcefully applied in the Middle East, and this is triggering for anyone with lived experience of conflict which includes intergenerational trauma. I argue that there is a need to remain vigilant to the impact of global conflict, in personal, professional, and political spheres of life.

KEYWORDS: therapist influence; intergenerational trauma; war trauma; Israel; Palestine

CONTEXTUAL KNOWING, CONTEXTUAL FRAMING, AND FORMULATING AT MULTIPLE LEVELS... 'FORMULATING BIG'

Barnett Pearce eloquently describes in the book *Making Social Worlds: A Communication Perspective* how after the September 11 attacks there was a moment which probably defined the next 20 years of foreign policy across the world, and the onus was on the USA, the victims

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of the atrocities that day, to respond appropriately (Pearce, 2007). On this occasion one might say the USA failed to act proportionately or acted with insufficient awareness and compassion, and without thought for future events and future generations, on both sides.

Similarly, now again, in another high-profile example, globally, the USA advised Israel not to act out in rage or vengeance after violence was perpetrated against them... in Joe Biden's own words, 'not to be consumed by rage' (Honderich, 2023). Again, the voice of peace was distant and quiet against the sound of militaries, but it was there, competing against the rhetoric of entitlement, entitlement to self-defence, in a claim that places armies and their actions above humanitarian law (a claim that was supported by other countries). However, what self-defence translated into, in the Middle East, was the large-scale invasion of an occupied territory in search of attackers and in the process, the mass killing of civilians. Unfortunately, the same outcome will likely beset Israel, as was observed for the USA following 9-11, that of a protracted war and although disproportionate, casualties on both sides (at the time of publication, this stands at 45,936 Palestinians versus 1,706 Israelis [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025]). This is another example of a majority population in a high threat, low security state, despite their comparative, overwhelming strength, and their actions indicating that some lives are worth more than others.

Global events such 9-11 and October 7, 2023 are, of course, complex, after all there are so many variables and factors involved. This is a perspective that has been voiced by United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres (2023) when he stated that the events perpetrated in Israel 'did not happen in a vacuum' which is no surprise to therapists who come across this all the time in therapeutic encounters. Namely, the framing of a present moment that is built on past events, also present in current realities; an analysis that uses a broad lens, and that looks backwards and forwards in time, at multiple levels, and includes all factors. One might say there is no end or limit to understanding and no end to formulating in this way, and behind it a 'social construction theory is really a lens about lenses' (Hoffman, 1990, p. 3).

In summary, I propose a way of understanding local and global events, from a psychological perspective, that mirrors Guterres' words, that no event, in fact *no-thing* exists 'in a vacuum', and this is as true for global conflict as it is for interpersonal events. Rather, everything that exists in the present has come about in the context of a past, and this acts as a precursor to the future, so past and present are influencing future all the time. In other words, we can see a process of contextual force, in action, as decisions made now have a lasting impact on relations and the wellbeing of many generations to come, interpersonally and globally.

A PERSONAL-PROFESSIONAL-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHALLENGES OF MAINTAINING A POSITION OF NEUTRALITY WITH REGARDS TO THE CURRENT CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The futility of the path chosen by armed actors to this conflict, in terms of securing peace and justice for the October 7, 2023 victims—indeed for all victims of Israeli–Palestinian violence—has never been so stark.

Informed by multiple lenses through which I see the world, below I highlight dimensions of relevance at play and offer several reasons why all nations need to remain as neutral as possible in this protracted conflict which has the potential to escalate at any time.

First, these are neighbouring populations, and this is a dispute over land ownership. The trigger to the recent offensive was a security breach of a boundary, and of course boundaries exist to keep people safe. Rather than double-down on the security of its borders, instead a decision was made to escalate and accelerate efforts at military domination and the occupation of another people, a people with its own independently elected governing group. The state of Israel's failure to defend its borders is no reason to start an offensive of this kind. An agenda that is a war of occupation is being fought but under the guise of regime change against a ruling party that admittedly is banned in many countries, but in a way that echoes an apartheid or dictatorship because of the proximity of people.

Second, for reasons of humanitarian law. Reasonable force in common law and humanitarian law is defined as necessary and proportionate and the protection of civilians is paramount, and the numbers of civilians lost in this war, as time goes by, are simply too high. Self-protection like any aggression, is only justified if the reasons are valid, lawful, and the response proportionate. I say humanitarian law and the sanctity of life must be respected, always. Not taking sides is the only way of staying within international law, which concurs with the recent indictment of both Hamas and the Israeli government by the International Criminal Court.

Third, because the need for humanitarian aid remains high, and safe passage for workers is critical. The number of attacks on humanitarian aid workers going about their daily work has been staggering. The idea that aid can be delivered in a warzone at the same time as there are ongoing attacks from planes and drones is nonsensical. Concerns about this have been heightened especially since the attack on a World Central Kitchen aid convoy that occurred on April 1, 2024 (see, e.g., Vock and Turnbull, 2024). The need for aid efforts to proceed, in the absence of ongoing attacks, is overwhelming.

Fourth, current attempts to find solutions are short-term when what is needed is a long-term solution to this long-running dispute over territory. In any exchange of hostages for prisoners this is simply a short-term solution to managing tensions in the region and this is unlikely, in itself, to bring about a lasting peace (Fleischmann, 2023). In the seven-day

exchange that took place at the end of November 2023, there was also an accompanying exchange of slurs, and the words 'occupiers' and 'terrorists' were frequently used. These words were used to cause maximum offence by devaluing and degrading the other in this war of cancelling cultures, a war of degradation, each blaming the other for carrying out worse atrocities. We await to see the outcome of the second hostage exchange, especially how many more people will have to die if commitments are not honoured or delayed, likely more than the number of hostages currently held. Meanwhile the war of words continues, a never-ending cycle; it is a war of degradation, of cancelling cultures.

Fifth, the war continues to have a polarising effect and countries outside the region are being pulled into a toxic dynamic and asked to take sides. (By recognising the Palestinian state and by advocating for a two-state solution, countries such as Spain, Norway, and Ireland have recently given confidence to other countries to set a similar example [Landale, 2024].) This has been seen before in earlier wars: after the Second World War, for example, and in recent times after 9-11 attacks. The dynamic perpetuating this is when a people or country is feeling vulnerable and insecure (e.g., due to a border incursion) which then causes a vicious cycle or dynamic of victimisation. However difficult for surrounding countries to remain neutral, there can be no useful role played in reducing tension and resolving conflict if external actors are seen to be partial to one side or the other. It is this victimisation that creates the mindset 'you are either with us or against us', as we have heard as rhetoric so many times. The need to stand apart from this polarisation and from an over-identification with victimhood is clear as there are perpetrators and victims on both sides.

Sixth, for many nations there are ulterior interests in this region and there is a value attached to the trade passing through neighbouring seas, as has been seen when this is threatened. However, risk to profits is no reason or justification for joining a war or joining an offensive against other countries. Again, reference to self-defence by countries outside the region is questionable given these wider interests, and involvement in the defence of commercial interests and shipping lanes, over and above human lives cannot be supported from an ethical perspective.

Finally, the global civilian community is calling out for a ceasefire. The call for a ceasefire is so overwhelming and widespread that this cannot be ignored.

In summary, commitment is needed on a global scale to build back and invest in infrastructure, for a regional two-state solution, and in a way that does not prevent the freedom of movement of inhabitants. Only by showing unwavering, long-term support to both sides to demilitarise the region can age-old hostilities and insecurities begin to reduce, whereas a widening offensive poses only further risk to civilian lives. Longer term, the losers in this war of occupation and degradation are the children living now and children yet to be born, children whose lives or futures have been cut short, and who in time are exposed to a narrative of hatred for neighbours and for reasons unknown to them.

To be clear; whether suicide or casualty of war, the loss of one life is one too many, and the long-term impact of any war is felt for many, many generations to come.

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To all peace-activists and peacebuilders, the world over.

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