



STATEMENT ON THE WAR IN GAZA

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Loss of life in whatever cause is terrible and offends the human condition. Systematic killing, especially of children, women, and the non-combatant majority, is indefensible.

All of us have been shocked by the wanton violence that erupted a fortnight ago in Israel and Gaza, and its unrelenting escalation since. The descent into the antediluvian notion of 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' cannot fester amongst and divide us from the innate desire to be at peace with ourselves and with one another, creating a better and safer world for our loved ones. Bombs, bullets and bigotry can never replace justice, tolerance and inclusivity in our fractured, yet shared, world.

Over 2570 years ago, the Greek writer Aeschylus stated 'In war, truth is the first casualty'. The ricochet of blame, the untruths and abject lack of appropriate leadership who can rise above the centuries old disputes and display statesmanship, instead of foment further human destruction and habitat, is sorely needed, to make our world safer, away from the current miasma and myopia, where war becomes the first, instead of the last, resort.

Those of us who have lived through the worst of apartheid oppression – rightly defined by the United Nations as 'a crime against humanity' – are horrified by the graphic live scenes where we can view war as it happens, committed by the few protagonists and the many, mostly innocent, victims. The parallels between the apartheid crime against humanity in South Africa and Israeli-Palestinian conflict are irresistible.

Yet, nothing that we have experienced in the worst apartheid brutality and killing sprees has prepared us for the sheer murderous intent that we are vicariously experiencing, and the lame but vehement justifications that remind us of the massacres of Sharpeville (21 March 1960), Soweto (16 June 1976) and other sites of our unconscionable denialism and shameful history. For what it's worth, while the gross human rights violations were occurring, the apartheid defenders were terrified of 'Will you not do to us as we have done unto you?' This seemed to undergird their naked hostility to those of us who stood on the side of social justice, equality and the quest for our true humanity. Those who have actually experienced unbridled oppression, flagrant exploitation and the egregious attempt to dehumanise us, were never bent on the primeval bloodlust of vengeance and retribution, which is not theirs but 'is Mine, I will repay, sayeth the Lord', versions of which are replete in the Bible, from ancient Hebrew to later versions. Amongst the Commandments are the injunctions: 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'Thou shalt not steal' while 'the name of the Lord thy God' continues to be taken in vain.

Our members have been inundated with calls from social and traditional media, and tried and tested leadership at various levels in society – including the clergy, health and legal professions – to explain the effects of war as it happens, (whether we want to listen, view or read about it) and help mitigate the impacts on their viewers, listeners and readers. Psychology has significantly grown out

of wars, not only from 'shell shock' to 'PTSD', but from selection of military personnel to improving their performance under extremely stressful conditions, and other functioning. Thankfully, we are better known for our compassionate caring for those we treat in various settings throughout the lifespan.

Can we justify war and violence? Can we justify inhumanity? Can we justify murder? Can we ever make it better for victims of the holocaust? Can we make it better for the victims of genocide in Rwanda, Palestine, or anywhere else? We can be beacons of peace and prevent gratuitous violence. We can use our scientific and applied knowledge to inform leaders to avoid war and its evident brutalities, which always cause profound dislocation of all types, and for which there are no excuses. Research on the effects of war, especially on children, speaks for itself, while post-war trauma interventions evidence low success.

How do we protect our children – our collective future – from the harmful content of war that they are glued to and which they are inevitably being traumatised and socialised by? Extreme responses, ever-present watchfulness, withdrawal from ordinary healthy developmental processes, and other deleterious consequences are quite likely to become normative. The social media era is a bane and a boon. Its intended good can be easily swayed into deliberate distortion, being thrust into needless fear, becoming a very accessible conduit for narrow and dangerous views, peddling self and other hate which are all too common. This steadily replaces the socialisation – through education/information received in all forms in the home, the school, the playground, the media, other social and religious engagements; all supposedly safe spaces – that is a necessary requirement for well-rounded and thriving children, becoming better and fuller human beings than the carriers of trauma, hate and intolerance that they are subjected to.

It is about time for all of us to have open conversations about our beliefs, our fears, our conceptualisations of the other, our experiences of the apartheid past and the democratic present, so that we are able to understand one another's pain and what brings us joy. This will help reduce the nightmares that we have in our troubled and deeply-divided world, and shape a more considerate, compassionate and caring future for all.

We call for the end to all structural and military violence and the provision of humanitarian aid to those most affected.

How we treat the worst off, anywhere, underlines our own claim to being human.

Psychological Society of South Africa