

Response to 'An open letter: In solidarity with all children suffering in wars; to all who hold or share a concern for the wellbeing of children'

To the Editor: We wish to express our concern about the March 2025 letter^[1] by Van As *et al.* titled 'In solidarity with all children suffering in wars; to all who hold or share a concern for the wellbeing of children.' Despite its title emphasising a broad concern for all children, the authors' focus on only Gaza reveals their biases and intent.

While we recognise the authors' attempt to empathise with Jewish Holocaust trauma, their attempt to utilise the Shoah to psychoanalyse Jewish national identity is quite alarming. Such reasoning, by individuals who seem not to be mental health practitioners, pathologises Jewish historical suffering, distorts clinical concepts such as trauma and abuse cycles, and serves to politically delegitimise an entire nation. The statement that the Holocaust damaged Jewish national identity is antisemitic and would never be tolerated if made about any other ethnicity. Casting Jewish survivors of the Holocaust as perpetrators of genocide is a trope that echoes antisemitic libels that have no place in professional or academic discourse. In this tendentious accusation, the authors are guilty of Holocaust inversion.

Without evidence, the authors label Israel's response a 'modern-day genocide', a term with specific legal meaning and one without any ruling or determination from an international judicial body. The International Court of Justice did not conclude that Israel had committed genocide.^[2] Using such unsubstantiated language in a medical journal is reckless and degrades the seriousness of the term. Their charge is replete with the usual specious accusations of withholding humanitarian aid and deliberately targeting children. They fail to mention the Israeli children murdered, orphaned and abducted by Hamas. They are also silent about the use by Hamas of civilians and civilian infrastructure as human shields, and the tragic prolongation of the war as a result of Hamas' refusal to give up hostages and lay down arms.

The authors use their medical authority to call for academic boycotts and the termination of institutional partnerships, under the banner of humanitarian concern. Their enhanced call for boycotts against institutions that do not share their political position contradicts fundamental principles of academic freedom, dialogue and open exchange.

We agree with the authors that protecting children in conflicts is a moral and professional duty. However, such advocacy must be impartial and ethically consistent. Singling out Israel, downplaying the context of Hamas' violence and calling for academic exclusion are not based in a concern for all children. It reflects bias.

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On behalf of:

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Australasian Jewish Medical Federation
Association des Médecins Juifs du Québec
Doctors against Racism and Antisemitism (Canada)
Global Jewish Health Alliance
South African Association of Jewish Mental Health and Allied Practitioners
Associação Médica Brasil-Israel

1. Van As AB, Sidler D, Allema JH, et al. An open letter: In solidarity with all children suffering in wars; to all who hold or share a concern for the wellbeing of children. *S Afr Med J* 2025;115(2):93-94. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.2025.v115i2.3044>
2. Casciani D. What did the ICJ ruling mean in South Africa's genocide case against Israel? BBC, 17 May 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3g9g63jl17o> (accessed 16 January 2025).

Response: Why solidarity with all children suffering in wars is not antisemitic

To the Editor: We thank the editors for the opportunity to clarify matters raised in our previous open letter, which the authors of the response appear to have misunderstood.

We are obviously very concerned about all children suffering in any war. Our focus lies on Gaza because it stands out as an exceptional case. The death of any children, including Israeli children, in a military attack, is *prima facie* a war crime. To date, >15 000 children have died in the conflict, >99.7% of them Palestinian children.^[1] The rate of killing of children in Gaza exceeds the rate of killing of children in all wars globally over the last 4 years.^[2,3] For example, the ratio of children to adults killed in Gaza^[1] is about six times higher than that in the Ukraine war.^[4] The reason for this is that the Israeli invasion of Gaza has deliberately relaxed the restrictions on targeting civilians during attacks, which has resulted in massively increased civilian casualties.^[5] It is this particularly egregious lack of restraint on protecting non-combatants that has formed the basis of a case of genocide against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and for warrants issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the arrest of two Israeli politicians for war crimes.

Notably, 37 children were among the 695 civilians killed in Israeli settlements in the 7 October attacks,^[6] which constitutes a war crime. Since then, no Israeli children have died from the conflict. In contrast, >15 000 Palestinian children have died in Gaza in relentless attacks on a captive, densely populated civilian population.^[7] After Israel unilaterally terminated the ceasefire on 17 March, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that Israeli attacks continued to cause the deaths or injury of ~100 children every day.^[8]

We believe it is appropriate that Hamas and other combatants should be held accountable for war crimes committed against children, but it is absurd to argue that the ongoing slaughter of children in Gaza should not be stopped because of a war crime committed on 7 October 2023. The tragic consequences could equally have been ended had Israel honoured the ceasefire agreement this year, ensuring that any remaining captives on both sides would be released without further loss of human life. Instead, Israel has chosen to unilaterally prolong the war.

To focus on the deaths of children in Gaza is therefore to highlight the most distressing example of this war on children, deliberately inflicted by authorities who know that their military tactics will lead to the injury and deaths of thousands of children. The deliberate injury or death of any child is unacceptable, and we seek to defend all children, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Arab, Israeli, Druze or Bedouin, against any abuse.

The authors appear to take exception to our mention of the Holocaust. Rather than stigmatising any population group, our reference is intended to explore an explanation, but not in any way a justification, for what is currently happening to children in this very vicious and cruel war. We are not alone in recognising that the Holocaust is intricately and intimately linked to the construction of Jewish identity, and scholars do, indeed, locate that in psychological reasoning.^[9-11] What appears to be alarming to the authors is not the exploration of the role of the Holocaust in Jewish identity, but the fact that this analysis is part of a criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza leading to massive and preventable child deaths.

We do not, as the authors assert, pathologise Jewish historical suffering. The cycle of victimhood turning into perpetration is well recognised in the trauma literature, both for individual offenders^[12-15] and at collective level.^[16] We do not believe that Jews are somehow different to other traumatised groups. To suggest that Jewish (Holocaust and other) suffering is unique is not a psychological argument but a political argument, frequently used for the purposes of justifying a state's political action. We know, for example, that the persecution of Afrikaners by the British colonialists in concentration camps at the end of the 'Boer War' served as the basis for a deep psychological trauma that has been suggested as instrumental to the creation of Apartheid, and an example of victims of one generation becoming victimisers in the next.^[17,18]

There are many Jews around the world, Holocaust survivors and their descendants, whose actions belie the idea of 'an entire nation' because they actively protest Israeli actions as 'not in my name'.^[19-21] Indeed, Holocaust survivors and their descendants can be found at the forefront of global protests against the current genocide in Gaza.^[22-24] The nation state of Israel today cannot be said to speak for all Jews, and there is extensive evidence of Jewish push-back against Israeli policies in Gaza. Labelling criticism of Israeli actions, such as excessive use of military force, as delegitimising an 'entire nation' may be used by Zionist supporters to suppress legitimate criticism of Israel.

It is also unclear why mental health practitioners should have a monopoly on understanding human trauma, or how the authors can judge our experience of working in the trauma field. Expressing an opinion on matters of such enormous moral and physical consequence must be our collective duty as healthcare workers and humans, and should not be restricted to a single professional category.

The authors further accuse us of antisemitism because we raise the relationship of the Holocaust to Jewish identity. This is puzzling, as there is an extensive literature on the relationship between Jewish identity and the Holocaust by Jewish scholars, much of which recognises the enormity of the impact of the Holocaust on how Jews come to see themselves, both within Israel and in the diaspora. For example, in his book *The Israelis*, Amos Elon described the Holocaust as 'a basic trauma of Israeli society' whose effects are 'impossible to exaggerate'. This focus on the Holocaust '... accounts for the prevailing sense of loneliness ... the obsessive suspicions, the towering urge for self-reliance ... the fears and prejudices, passions, pains, and prides that spin the plot of public life. The lingering memory of the Holocaust makes Arab threats of annihilation sound plausible ... The trauma of the Holocaust leaves an indelible mark on national psychology, the tenor and content of public life, the conduct of foreign affairs, on politics, education, literature, and the arts.'^[25] Ian Lustick, professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania and an expert in Middle Eastern studies, notes that contested versions of the understanding of the Holocaust have played out since World War II, and the current hegemonic view of the Holocaust as the 'Template for Jewish Life', which frames the Holocaust 'as a reliable political and moral guide for all Jews, whether secular or religious, as to what it means to be Jewish in an overwhelmingly non-Jewish world', is one that has gained ascendancy in recent years.^[26] It is 'driven by parochial and temporary political interests', resulting in 'extreme and highly particular features of current Israeli Jewish collective memory of the Holocaust'. These are Jewish scholars debating what the Holocaust means for Jewish memory. This is not an antisemitic argument at all, unless one subscribes to the view that any criticism of the state of Israel is antisemitism.

We therefore disagree with the authors in their claim that to portray Jewish survivors of the Holocaust as perpetrators of genocide is antisemitic libel and Holocaust inversion. For a number of reasons, this argument is not logical.

Firstly, genocide is a crime committed by a state, not by individuals. The fact that Israel repeatedly asserts itself as speaking for all Jewish people is a claim that many Jewish people do not accept.

Secondly, there is extensive evidence that the Israeli state has committed genocide,^[27-36] which the United Nations defines (in article II of the Genocide Convention) as 'any ... acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group', such as killing or causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; or imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group. Taking this definition into account, it becomes impossible not to name Israel's actions in Gaza as genocide. We are not alone in arguing that the actions of the Israeli government in Gaza have crossed a line of genocide. There are numerous scholars of genocide, history, politics and Jewish studies, many of whom are Israeli Jews, who have come to the conclusion that Israel is responsible for a genocide in Gaza.^[36-43]

Thirdly, it is illogical to insist that a victim cannot ever be considered a perpetrator because they are Jewish, or that the legacy of the Holocaust can be invoked to give Israel the impunity to do what it likes in Gaza – which has included killing an average of 30 children every day since the start of the war.

Fourthly, the literature reveals many narratives regarding how the Holocaust is framed in Jewish history, with extensive debate about how it has been understood at different historical periods.^[26] We are concerned that adopting one view of the Holocaust's meaning for Jewish identity that sees 'ferocious antisemitism lurking in the hearts and cultures of all non-Jews at all times'^[26] is stifling of any accountability.

Lastly, it remains very difficult to understand how the authors arrive at the conclusion that we are practising Holocaust inversion, which is a term used to describe casting Jews as Nazis.^[44] Nowhere in our open letter do we make such a claim. We are, however, of the opinion that Israel is currently committing genocide, and if the authors reinterpret that to mean Jews are acting like Nazis, then it is the authors who are inventing a reason to discredit the message of our opinion piece.

The authors also dismiss the extensive evidence for genocide by referring to a BBC interview with an ICJ judge to dispute that Israel has committed genocide. This claim represents a sleight of hand rather than a proper argument. The ICJ, based on extensive information provided, did conclude that there was *prima facie* evidence of genocide, and ordered Israel twice to cease the killing of civilians, including children, an order Israel has openly ignored. The ICJ did not throw out the case for lack of evidence. Claiming one is innocent until proven guilty may be appropriate in a context of prosecuting a person for theft, but when 30 children are losing their life every day as a result of Israel's ongoing and unrelenting military attacks, turning the fact that a legal process is long and tortuous into denial of culpability is deeply cynical and contrary to medical values.

Indeed, there is abundant evidence^[27,30,32,33,36,45-49] that Israel has withheld humanitarian aid, bombed water desalination plants, destroyed hospitals, attacked ambulances, detained, tortured and killed medical personnel and blocked essential medical supplies, including most recently the entry of polio vaccine into Gaza. We ask the authors to reconsider their claims that the language in our open

letter is unsubstantiated, and also to consider why Israel saw fit to stop the entry of polio vaccine to prevent children dying or suffering long-term disability as a result of a preventable illness.^[49]

As for Hamas' use of civilians and civilian infrastructure as human shields, this is a trope that has featured regularly as justification for Israel's persistent attacks on civilians, but these claims, entirely from Israel Defense Forces (IDF) releases, have not been verified by any independent sources, and have rather served as legal justification for the extensive killings of civilians, including children, enacted by Israeli forces.^[42] In any event, even if combatants were present in civilian infrastructure, Israel has long since abandoned any pretence of compliance with the Geneva Protocols, which place severe limits on civilian casualties and protect hospitals and other services.^[50] Most recently, the cold-blooded and deliberate attack on ambulances travelling to injured civilians in Rafah, and the execution and burial of the bodies of the medics with their vehicles, shows the extent to which the Israeli military is unwilling to obey international humanitarian law.^[51] Further, there are numerous documented instances of the IDF using Palestinian children as human shields during home occupations or tunnel clearances, an act that is openly contrary to the Geneva Protocols.^[52,53] We assert that, in contrast to the unsubstantiated claims by the authors about human shielding, our opinion piece is well supported by independent evidence.

The entire reason for our letter was to indicate that political positions should be secondary to alleviating the suffering of children; children are just innocent young human beings. There are no 'Jewish', 'Muslim', or 'Christian' children; these are just labels allocated to them by religious movements, often for political reasons. That is exactly what we detest, and we need to act to defend children. Boycotts are non-violent means to bring about change, and played a key role in ending one crime against humanity – Apartheid. We make no apology for saying that the time has come to defend children, all children, against abuse.

This means that on one matter, we do agree with the authors. There is definitely bias in our open letter; it is severely biased towards young human beings, called children. When are we, as adults and healthcare professionals, taking their side? Do we not have professional obligations to advocate for the vulnerable and for children? Or do we continue to play religious and political games negating our duty towards them? If we cannot speak out to protect the life of a Palestinian child, then we are betraying all children.

Nelson Mandela, arguably the greatest statesman the African continent has brought forth, who spent 27 years in an Apartheid prison, became, after his release, one of the foremost child advocates internationally. He repeatedly said: 'We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.'

Our freedom is not at all served by the ongoing death of Palestinian children.

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