

To the Conference Organizers, Speakers, Participants and Sponsors:

Re: Conference entitled 'Recognition, Reparation, Reconciliation: The Light and Shadow of Historical Trauma', hosted at Stellenbosch University, 5-9 December 2018

The Recognition, Reparation, Reconciliation Conference is of great significance to South African society and the rest of the world as we face the legacies of historical traumas at a moment of seismic political shifts globally. While we are unequivocal in our support for the conference, we are concerned about the participation of seven academics from three Israeli universities. A group supported by the organizations listed below met to develop a response after approaches from concerned participants. After careful consideration and wide consultation, including with a conference organizer, representative Palestinian academics and a reading of the call for solidarity endorsed by the vast majority of Palestinian academics (<https://bdsmovement.net/pacbi>) we respond as follows.

We ask the organizers, speakers, participants and sponsors to act courageously in a show of moral, political and historical conscience by:

- honoring the South African history of struggle against apartheid;
- acting in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle against Israeli apartheid and its occupation of Palestine;
- honoring the integrity and importance of the conference theme;
- supporting the rationale of the call for the academic and cultural boycott.

We therefore:

call on the conference organizers to withdraw the participation of the Israeli academics.

call on the conference organizers, speakers, participants and sponsors to make a public statement in unequivocal support of the Palestinian call for the academic and cultural boycott of apartheid Israel.

Background to our call

We understand that participants have already made commitments of their time and finances to attend the conference. However, we are also reminded of the words of Edward Said in his Reith Lectures 'Representations of the Intellectual' where he said:

"Nothing is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position that you know to be the right one, but you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or authority figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so to remain within the responsible mainstream"

Many academic, human rights, research and legal bodies throughout the world, including the South African Human Science Research Council (HSRC) [<http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/research-data/view/4634>] have recognised Israel as an apartheid state according to the international legal definition of apartheid.

Through Israel's "matrix of control" Palestinians and Jewish Israelis are subjected to vastly unequal and differentiated legal, spatial and administrative methods of governance which meets the criteria of the definition of an apartheid state as defined by the United Nations and international human rights law.

The passing of the 'Nation-State' law in July 2018 has entrenched privileged citizenship rights for Jewish Israelis and negated the right to equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel, amongst many other egregious violations of basic human rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank are subject to the draconian laws of Israel's military administration which governs them whilst the approximately 400 000 Jewish settlers who live in settlements in these areas are subjected only to Israeli civil law.

Colleagues in Palestine have called on solidarity organizations and all people of conscience to ratchet-up solidarity work in the light of what Israeli academic, Ilan Pappe, has termed, '*incremental genocide*' in Gaza. Most recent developments include the mass shootings of March of Return protestors in Gaza. In the past few months hundreds of unarmed Palestinians in Gaza including medical personnel, journalists and children have been killed for demonstrating for their right to return to their land.

The complicity of academic institutions

There are many ways in which Israeli academic institutions collude with and advance the occupation, ethnic cleansing and racism in fields as diverse as engineering, geography, demography, hydrology, archaeology, history and even psychology. (See for example, <https://bdsmovement.net/files/2011/02/EOO23-24-Web.pdf>) Academic institutional complicity with state practices of apartheid has produced an atmosphere of suspicion, fear and censorship with punitive consequences for open and critical inquiry. Academics and students who are outspoken in their dissent are surveilled by university administrations, colleagues, other students and state intelligence services.

At Palestinian universities conditions are incomparably worse with frequent Israeli military invasions and the bombing of campuses, arrests of students and academic faculty, the prevention of entry for international academics and students or renewal of study and work visas. Most significantly, the arduous bureaucracy involved for Palestinian academics to acquire permits and permission to travel for research, conference presentations and other scholarly events is often wielded so as to prevent the free movement of Palestinian scholars and graduate students.

This is in a context where the basic right of freedom of movement for Palestinians is already severely curtailed by the Apartheid Wall, check points, lock downs and an onerous system of permit applications.

The call for academic and cultural boycott

The vast majority of Palestinian academics and some progressive Israeli academics have agreed on an academic boycott until Israel agrees to extend full human and civil rights to Palestinian citizens of Israel, to end the occupation and enable the Palestinian right to return [<https://bdsmovement.net/pacbi/academic-boycott-guidelines>]. All these demands are consistent with international law.

In the absence, to the best of our knowledge, of a publicly known position in support of the rationale calling for the academic boycott, we assume that the Israeli delegates remain part of the silent majority implicated in a currently unfolding historical trauma. We reject any kind of normalization of Israeli oppression in the context of the Palestinian struggle for human rights. Normalization is an entrenchment of the current *status quo* through participation in activities that bring together Palestinians and Israelis in ways that do not explicitly resist the occupation and all forms of discrimination, inequality and oppression of Palestinians including those who are citizens of Israel.

Our call applies to the seeming absence of authentic Palestinian representation as well. Indeed, one conference participant, Mohammed Dajani visited South Africa in 2016 as a guest of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies as a counter to the annual global Palestine solidarity event, 'Israeli Apartheid Week'. Dajani is promoted by the pro-Israeli lobby to posit a so-called 'moderate' Palestinian line, much as Bantustan and other figures were used by the South African apartheid regime to break international boycotts and sanctions and promote the idea that apartheid was a political dispute in which there were two equal sides in conflict.

Given our own settler colonial and apartheid past, our freedom struggle and the legacy of inequality, violence, racism and trauma we live with today, we find the false symmetry between an aggressor state and the popular resistance movement to be egregious. We cannot abide by a move which effectively "normalizes" Israeli apartheid.

Our appeal

We therefore urge the organizers, participants and sponsors not to turn away from the urgent and discomforting issues we raise. We acknowledge that the conference organizers put out an open call for papers. This is not an appeal to boycott the conference as a whole. However, in the absence of the visiting Israeli academics' support for the rationale behind the academic boycott, their participation at a conference of such moral and intellectual significance is unacceptable in the context of the worsening situation in Israel-Palestine and in respect of the call of the vast majority of Palestinian colleagues.

Sad as it might be towards the individuals as colleagues and as fellow human beings, we cannot avoid this difficult moment by calling for a strong message of solidarity with Palestinians and with resistance to Israeli apartheid.

If this Conference on Recognition, Reparation, Reconciliation turns away from the fact that the State of Israel is conducting a war against the Palestinian people's very right to exist and is silent on this matter, then there can be little meaningful contribution to knowledge on the recognition of past and current world traumas, on the politics of remembering and interpreting historical and current traumas, and on articulating different understandings of reparations for the too many horrors of the 20th and 21st centuries. The Palestinian people have made a clear and unambiguous call for us to respond that we cannot ignore.

Supported by:

PSC: Palestine Solidarity Campaign (SA)

SAJFP: South African Jews for a Free Palestine

KSA: Kairos South Africa

PSA: Palestine Solidarity Alliance

BDS SA: Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions-SA

MRN: Media Review Network

TDP UKZN: Theology and Development Programme, University of KwaZulu-Natal

KPSG UKZN: Kairos Palestine Study Group, University of KwaZulu-Natal

PTBFC UKZN: Public Theology Book and Film Club, University of KwaZulu-Natal

PMB-4-P: Pietermaritzburg for Palestine solidarity group

KZN PSF: KZN Palestine Solidarity Forum