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Commentary

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This interesting article challenges the tendency of psychologists to avoid dealing with political and social issues and calls for the psychological community to play a more prominent role in political processes intended to benefit individuals and society as a whole. The article relates, interchangeably, to political and social issues: “Psychologists may become active socially or politically and aspire to bring about change.”

Politics and social issues, however, are not synonymous and to take a political stand is different from being involved in social process. Politics is defined as “the art or science of government” (1) and usually reflects various interests, sometimes conflicting ones.

As with the rest of the population, psychologists do not all share the same political ideology and may believe in different solutions for the Israeli-Arab conflict. Thus, it is not realistic and not ethical to expect Israeli psychologists to take a political stand as a group.

A professional organization, however, does have an important social function, which derives from its

members’ specific profession. Mental health professionals are exposed to the consequences that war and violence have on people. Their social involvement and contribution can and should be expressed along the following professional lines:

1. Scientific research and publication — developing research on the causes and consequences of violence, for example, the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder in the community and in specific subgroups. The *Israel Journal of Psychiatry* recently dedicated a special issue to mental health in the Arab society. The article by Srour, “Children living under a multi-traumatic environment: The Palestinian case” (2), demonstrates very vividly the emotional lives of Palestinian children during times of war. The mental health consequences of political violence are reflected in two other articles as well (3, 4).
2. Training programs that will help in the prevention of violence and in helping the victims.
3. Cooperation with other professionals and with

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those who are working to promote peace, including politicians and media.

The World Psychiatric Association (WPA) recently published a declaration — “Mass violence and mental health” (5) — which is apolitical but takes a stand. The declaration recognizes that mass violence, such as war, terrorism, urban violence and similar acts, causes many deaths as well as material losses and mental health problems to both the survivors and the population at large and requests that the scientific sections of the WPA develop collaborative and multidisciplinary research on the origins of violence. The declaration recommends undertaking whatever is necessary to ensure that the scientific knowledge stemming from psychiatry and neurosciences and behavioral sciences is used in dealing with problems of violence.

Mental health professionals are not politicians and should not be involved, as a group, in political solutions for the prolonged and violent conflict in

our region. We can be involved and contribute to enhancing the awareness of the impact of violence on public health and to convey the need for research and action in this area.

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Commentary: How Can We Facilitate Change?

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I read with interest Nissim Avissar's paper. The issue of political involvement of analysts and therapists is close to my heart, and I share the author's wish to legitimize and encourage such involvement, which I believe could make — when planned wisely — a serious contribution both to our profession, which has to deal daily with the impact of political reality on the lives of our patients, and to society at large, which could learn from our thoughtful input.

A few facts need, however, to be corrected. First, Avissar's title speaks of psychologists, while “Imut” — his central example — included psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers. Second, it is inaccurate to say that activities during the first Intifada are

“the only exception to the rule of neutrality and passivity.” While this was undoubtedly the most active period, mental health professionals were involved in political activity in Israel, especially around the Israeli-Arab conflict, both earlier and later.

A fuller account is given in my paper quoted by Avissar (1), so I will only list a few notable examples briefly. First, earlier instances:

1. Before the elections in 1981 a group of psychologists considered issuing a public statement about Prime Minister Begin's shaky mental condition. Others, including myself, objected on ethical grounds; and the compromise was to issue instead a statement about the manipulative propa-