

# A conference to raise awareness on torture and the Istanbul Protocol

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The “Aspects of Trauma and Torture” conference, a collaborative effort between the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel and Physicians for Human Rights Israel, aimed to elevate awareness and deepen comprehension of torture and its multifaceted psychological, social, and legal ramifications. Centred around the launch of the Hebrew translation of the updated Istanbul Protocol, the conference addressed the diverse populations in Israel vulnerable to torture, including Israeli citizens, African asylum seekers, and Palestinian detainees. **Method:** Utilising a series of interdisciplinary lectures and interactive sessions, participants explored the profound implications of trauma and torture on individuals and communities, with a particular emphasis on the critical role of mental health, medical, and legal professionals in prevention and advocacy. This study investigated how participation in a conference focusing on trauma and torture influences attendees’ levels of awareness and motivation to engage in actions against torture. Forty attendees completed an online questionnaire that incorporated both open-ended and closed questions regarding the conference’s impact. **Results:** The findings revealed significant increases in attendees’ familiarity with the subject matter, a strengthened sense of professional collegiality, and an enhanced commitment to combating torture. Notable variations were observed between physical and virtual participants, as well as between those with an active role at the conference and passive attendees, and between individuals in psychosocial professions and those in other disciplines. **Discussion:** The findings highlight the pivotal role of conferences as catalysts for human rights education and advocacy, while also identifying areas for improvement in accessibility and engagement within hybrid formats. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on effective strategies for addressing torture and fostering systemic change. Furthermore, the article proffers recommendations for future conferences.

**Keywords:** torture, awareness, human rights education, Israel, Istanbul Protocol, descriptive research

## Introduction

Globally, numerous individuals are subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment at the hands of state actors or non-state armed groups. Scholarly research has consistently demonstrated that torture inflicts enduring trauma and profound psychological sequelae on victims. The maltreatment of protestors and detainees, particularly Palestinian individuals

residing under Israeli occupation, is reportedly pervasive in Israel and has been characterised as systematic, reflecting both practice and policy. Notably, despite filing over 1400 legal complaints against Israeli authorities, only two criminal investigations were initiated, and no indictments were issued (Kotef & Amir, 2025).

A principal factor contributing to the perpetuation of impunity for torture in Israel is the paucity of evidentiary material,

\* The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Journal, the Publisher or the Editors

which impedes prosecutorial proceedings and judicial determinations of guilt. This deficiency of evidence can be attributed, in part, to a deficit of knowledge regarding the systematic documentation of torture among medical and legal practitioners. Comprehensive knowledge and objective data regarding the prevalence of torture are constrained, given that such acts are often concealed and denied by state authorities. The Istanbul Protocol, the United Nations manual outlining procedures for the effective investigation and documentation of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (UN Office, 2022), has been employed and disseminated within Israel for many years, albeit among a relatively circumscribed cohort of committed professionals (Mukamel, 2016; Senesh, 2019; Weishut, Rokach, et al., 2024; Weishut, Steiner-Birman, et al., 2023). The Istanbul Protocol comprises guidelines for interviewing and examining individuals who allege torture, documenting complaints, and implementing legal and sociological strategies for the eradication of torture. In this region, the aforementioned protocol serves to document allegations of torture across diverse populations, including Palestinians who have experienced ill-treatment at the hands of either Israeli or Palestinian authorities, asylum seekers from various countries who have endured ill-treatment in their countries of origin or during transit to Israel, and victims of Israeli police violence.

The salience of torture as a critical issue within Israeli and Palestinian societies was amplified following the events of October 7, 2023. This period witnessed the emergence of a new cohort of potential torture victims, namely Israeli individuals affected by the Hamas attacks, including those subsequently released from captivity (Edwards, 2024; United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2024). Concurrently, there has been a reported exponential increase in the prevalence and severity of torture allegations concerning Palestinian detainees in Israel (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024). Consequently, at a time when allegations of torture have reached unprecedented gravity, the Istanbul Protocol has assumed heightened relevance and urgency. Furthermore, the prevailing political climate has become increasingly challenging for human rights advocacy, particularly in cases where such advocacy diverges from governmental policies or the objectives of the state's security apparatus. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) face considerable obstacles in sustaining their initiatives, and activists are subjected to marginalisation and aggression. As a result, there exist limited fora in which discourse on issues such as torture can occur.

Although considerable reports document instances of violence and torture perpetrated against Palestinian detainees

from the West Bank and “unlawful combatants” from Gaza, direct access to these individuals remains severely restricted. Legal counsel visits within penal institutions are infrequent, and post-release examinations are often unattainable, particularly for those returning to Gaza (B'tselem, 2024). Consequently, the prevention and eradication of torture constitute enduring and critical challenges within the global human rights discourse. Notwithstanding extant international legal frameworks, the practice of torture persists globally, necessitating the development and implementation of robust strategies for both awareness and prevention. Scholarly conferences are indispensable in disseminating knowledge (Paul Vincent & Donald, 2024) and can significantly facilitate collaborative efforts and dialogic exchange among policymakers, subject matter experts, and civil society organisations. Furthermore, the strategic employment of science communication can substantially contribute to public awareness regarding societal challenges (cf. Hindle et al., 2024).

Notwithstanding the explicit prohibition of torture and ill-treatment stipulated in international conventions, discrepancies between normative frameworks and practical implementation persist, wherein professionals may deviate from established ethical standards. Empirical evidence from a survey indicates that over one-third of medical students in Mauritius expressed support for corporal punishment during custody. This same study further revealed a pronounced interest in acquiring knowledge concerning the role of medical professionals in addressing the needs of torture victims (Agnihotri et al., 2007). The issue of complicity of medical and mental health professionals in acts of torture, as well as their dereliction of duty in documenting, reporting, and treating victims of torture, has been documented across diverse settings and nations (Miles, 2020; Siddiqui et al., 2013), including Israel (Physicians for Human Rights - Israel, 2025; Ziv, 1999). Recent observations suggest a significant hardening of attitudes among physicians toward Palestinian detainees, particularly those from Gaza, following the events of October 7th. This attitudinal shift is manifested in a reluctance to provide medical treatment and to document potential evidence of torture or violence experienced by detainees (Dyer, 2024).

Scholarly conferences focused on torture possess the potential to substantially influence participants' comprehension of torture and its deleterious human consequences. Empirical investigations suggest that public attitudes and awareness are pivotal determinants in driving societal shifts conducive to torture prevention. Furthermore, exposure to scholarly discourse elucidating the inefficacy of torture and its contravention of fundamental human rights principles has been shown to mark-

edly diminish public endorsement of its deployment (Kearns & Young, 2018). An exhaustive cross-national study demonstrated that, specifically within contexts of armed conflict, cognizance of the Geneva Conventions significantly attenuated support for the maltreatment of prisoners of war and, to a lesser extent, decreased support for targeting civilian populations (Wallace, 2019).

Conferences foster capacity building by creating structured training programs and facilitating professional networking opportunities for individuals engaged in the field. This exchange of expert knowledge can augment skills related to monitoring and reporting instances of torture. Moreover, conferences have the potential to function as catalysts for policy reform. Research conducted by McEntee et al. (2016) indicated that international conferences addressing human rights concerns, including the prevention of torture, correlate with demonstrable augmentation in state adherence to established international norms.

While the theoretical advantages of conferences in advancing knowledge concerning torture are apparent, further empirical inquiry is necessary to quantify their specific impact. The authors of this study, having been involved in organising the conference, sought to evaluate its effects. Consequently, this research endeavours to address a lacuna within existing scholarly literature by examining the extent to which participation in a conference focusing on trauma and torture influences attendees' familiarity with, and propensity to act upon, this issue. This endeavour aims to generate valuable insights into human rights education and public awareness campaigns. The central hypothesis posited that participation in such a conference would significantly enhance awareness and action regarding these critical issues.

### *The conference*

The conference entitled "Aspects of Trauma and Torture" was convened through a collaborative effort between the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel and Physicians for Human Rights Israel. Its central focus encompassed torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and their associated sequelae. This conference coincided with the launch of the Hebrew translation of the updated Istanbul Protocol, which serves as the internationally recognised guide for documenting torture. Given the Istanbul Protocol's substantial reliance on interdisciplinary collaboration among physicians, mental health professionals, and legal practitioners (Weishut, Rokach, et al., 2024; Weishut, Steiner-Birmann, et al., 2023), the conference was designed for professionals within these domains. The conference aimed to galvanise the medical and legal communities toward

adopting the Istanbul Protocol within their professional practices and areas of expertise and facilitate its acceptance as a legally admissible evidentiary tool.

The event was conducted in Tel Aviv and online in December 2024. It materialised amidst the ongoing armed conflict between Israel and its neighbouring states, a situation that persists at the time of this writing. The conference employed a hybrid format, a model widely regarded as the future trajectory of scientific conferences (Valenti et al., 2021). A third party financed the conference, enabling the option to waive participation fees, which aligns with established recommendations for enhancing inclusivity for socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals and those who lack the capacity for in-person attendance (Paul Vincent & Donald, 2024). Invitations to the conference were disseminated through newsletters of human rights organisations, social media platforms, and via a snowball sampling technique among staff and volunteers.

The conference encompassed a diverse array of topics about human rights, trauma, and ethical considerations, with a particular emphasis on the operational application of the Istanbul Protocol. It aimed to illuminate various facets of the subject matter while addressing the distinct vulnerabilities of diverse populations affected by torture, namely Israeli citizens, African asylum seekers, and Palestinian individuals. The exclusion of discussions concerning acts of torture and inhuman treatment within Gaza was necessitated by the lack of Israeli professional access to verifiable data. The conference was primarily directed toward medical, mental health, and legal professionals, while remaining accessible to the public with an interest in the subject.

Most lectures were delivered in person, supplemented by a limited number of virtual presentations. The organisers were acutely aware of the inherent challenges individuals might face in participating in a conference focused on torture. Indeed, numerous prospective attendees were apprehensive and reluctant to engage with the subject. Recognising the emotionally charged nature of the conference, a dedicated mental health professional was assigned to support participants as needed.

A total of 117 individuals participated, with 72 attending in person and 45 participating virtually. The participants represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds, with the majority identifying as social workers, psychologists, physicians, or lawyers. The conference commenced with an overview of the legal landscape surrounding torture in Israel and the general utilisation of the Istanbul Protocol. It concluded with a panel discussion focusing on the situation since October 7th. In the interim, 16 concise lectures were presented, distributed across four parallel sessions. The presenters represented a broad

spectrum of institutions, including academic universities, medical centres, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dedicated to human rights and refugee advocacy, legal advocacy groups, and therapeutic clinics specialising in treating torture survivors. The main subjects were as follows:

*Torture Survivors and Refugees:* A salient theme of the conference centred on the lived experiences of torture survivors, with particular emphasis on asylum seekers in Israel originating from Eritrea and Sudan. Presentations addressed therapeutic modalities for working with these survivors of torture across African regions and the Sinai Peninsula, focusing on trauma recovery, the imperative of culturally sensitive care, and the distinct mental health needs of refugees subjected to collective violence. Concurrently, the deleterious conditions of the detention of Palestinian individuals within Israel and their subsequent ramifications were examined. A critical point of discourse revolved around the imperative of providing accessible services for survivors of torture.

*Psychological Evaluations:* Several presentations were dedicated to exploring the application of the Istanbul Protocol in documenting and assessing the physiological and psychological sequelae of torture, primarily concerning Palestinian survivors, including both adult and paediatric populations. Subject matter experts underscored the significance of interdisciplinary collaboration between medical and mental health professionals to ensure comprehensive care and rigorous legal documentation. The role of professionals in utilising the protocol to substantiate victims' claims and facilitate their recovery was highlighted. Further presentations addressed the phenomena of moral injury and secondary trauma experienced by those witnessing or involved in the care of torture survivors. Additionally, the long-term societal impacts of exposure to torture, including the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the implications of sexual torture, were discussed.

*Legal and ethical issues in torture:* Multiple presentations scrutinised the legal frameworks governing torture and human rights violations, with a specific focus on the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of refugees to countries where they face the risk of torture. Legal scholars discussed the challenges encountered by medical professionals and human rights defenders in confronting these violations, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Additionally, discussions encompassed specific scenarios of torture, such as the medical management of Palestinian detainees and the ethical considerations surrounding force-feeding during hunger strikes. These presentations further addressed the broader ethical dilemmas medical professionals and human rights advocates confront in such contexts.

*Work with families of Israeli hostages:* Another focal point was the psychological distress experienced by families and communities of Israeli hostages. Presentations concentrated on group psychotherapy interventions for individuals secondarily and tertiary affected, addressing the ramifications of ambiguous loss and delineating therapeutic models for supporting those impacted by abductions and terrorism. The necessity of family therapy in facilitating reunification with relatives returning from abduction or terrorism was also examined, with a focus on ameliorating relational strain stemming from prolonged trauma, including physical and psychological torture during captivity.

*Human rights education in medicine:* A proposal was advanced to integrate human rights education into medical curricula, underscoring the pivotal role of healthcare professionals in addressing the needs of patients who have experienced torture. This discourse encompassed the application of the Istanbul Protocol in training medical students and practising professionals."

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were all attendees of the conference "Aspects of Trauma and Torture," who were invited to participate voluntarily by completing a feedback questionnaire. The sole inclusion criterion was attendance at the conference. A total of 40 attendees (34% of the conference participants) completed the survey, comprising 29 physical and 11 online attendees. The participants represented a diverse demographic, with birth years ranging from 1943 to 2009 ( $M = 1970$ ) and professions spanning medical (15%), psychosocial (52.5%), legal (12.5%), and other fields (10%). Among the respondents, 72.5% identified as women, 20% as men, and 7.5% as other or were unidentified. Although we do not have exact information on conference participants beyond those who completed the survey, on the face of it, these demographics appear to be in line with those of the overall attendance, with a majority of middle-aged women in psychosocial professions.

### Instrument

A questionnaire was designed to assess the impact of the conference on trauma and torture on attendees' knowledge and awareness. The survey began with an introductory statement explaining its purpose and assuring participants of their right to voluntary participation, anonymity, and data confidentiality. The questionnaire used a Likert scale to measure participants' interest in and familiarity with the topic of torture before and af-



ter the conference. It also included questions about their professional background, level of involvement in the conference, and perceived professional benefits gained. Additionally, the survey gauged the conference's impact on participants' willingness to act against torture and any changes in their perception of torture. Open-ended questions invited participants to share both positive and negative experiences, as well as any additional comments. The final item asked about their interest in receiving updates on training related to the Istanbul Protocol.

### *Procedure*

Participants received an email invitation to complete an online questionnaire (Google form) about the conference. The invitation included a link to the questionnaire, which was sent out within a couple of days after the conference and could be completed anonymously. To increase the response rate, we sent a reminder a week later. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests, as appropriate, to examine group differences and associations between variables employing SPSS software (version 29.01.1). We analysed the responses to the open questions by identifying recurrent themes.

### *Transparency and openness*

This study adhered to ethical research standards advocated by the American Psychological Association. It received prior approval from the Review Board (IRB) of the Department of Psychology and the School of Social Work at the Jerusalem Multidisciplinary College (formerly Hadassah Academic College), ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Responses were stored securely in the institute's cloud, accessible only to the research team. The questionnaire design, data collection process, and statistical analysis methods have been detailed to maintain transparency. Data, materials, and analysis code can be made available to interested researchers upon reasonable request.

### **Results**

The "Aspects of Trauma & Torture Conference" survey results offer valuable insights into participant experiences and the event's impact. Ratings were collected on Likert scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) across several conference outputs. When asked about the personal meaningfulness of the conference for the participants, the mean score was 6.21. An independent samples t-test revealed that the mean score was notably higher for psychosocial professionals ( $M = 6.63$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) compared to others ( $M = 5.92$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $t(30) = 2.142$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , with a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.77$ ). The perceived personal significance of the conference was also signifi-

cantly higher among staff and presenters ( $t(34) = 2.204$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) than among others, with a mean difference of 0.88.

On the question of the extent to which the conference strengthened a feeling of togetherness, the mean score was 5.69. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in perceived togetherness between groups ( $t(34) = 3.072$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ), with staff and presenters scoring higher ( $M = 6.75$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ) than other participants ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ). Participants rated the professional insights gained at a mean score of 4.86. When asked if the conference strengthened the desire to take action against torture, the mean was 5.90. No significant group differences were found for these variables. No statistical difference was found between the genders on any of the variables pertaining to the conference's output.

Attendees reported a statistically significant increase in their familiarity with torture following the conference ( $p < 0.001$ ). Pre-conference familiarity averaged 5.18 ( $SD = 1.69$ ), which increased to 5.88 ( $SD = 1.28$ ) post-conference. Analysis revealed significant correlations between participants' prior interest in the topic and various outcomes. Specifically, pre-conference interest was positively correlated with pre-conference familiarity ( $r = 0.811$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and post-conference familiarity ( $r = 0.519$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Post-conference familiarity with torture (but not pre-conference interest or familiarity) linked to perceived professional gain ( $r = 0.470$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ), a strengthened willingness to act against torture ( $r = 0.567$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and the experienced significance of the conference ( $r = 0.649$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A comparison between participants who attended physically and via Zoom revealed divergence regarding the feeling of togetherness. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in perceived togetherness between groups ( $t(34) = 3.580$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), with participants attending in person reporting significantly higher scores ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) compared to virtual participants ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ). The effect size was large ( $d = 1.38$ , 95% CI [0.54, 2.19]), indicating a meaningful practical difference. The difference between the two modes of attendance in perception of the personal meaning of the conference was not statistically significant ( $t(34) = 1.850$ ,  $p = 0.073$ ); mean scores, though, suggested a trend, with physical attendees scoring higher ( $M = 6.37$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than virtual participants ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ). The effect size was moderate, suggesting that while the difference is not statistically significant, it may hold practical relevance. For other variables, including familiarity with torture after the conference, perceived professional input from the conference, and strengthening the wish to act against torture, no statistically significant differences were observed between physical and virtual participants.

Qualitative data from open-ended questions revealed that participants identified the professional organisational structure, the diverse range of intellectually stimulating topics, and the collaborative milieu as key strengths of the conference. Conversely, a few respondents raised concerns about the underrepresentation of Palestinian speakers. Furthermore, technical impediments, including audio disruptions and restricted access to Zoom sessions, were noted as potential areas for enhancement. Participants expressed a preference for extended and more comprehensive sessions, as well as the provision of recorded materials to broaden accessibility. Ten respondents expressed an interest in undertaking further training on the documentation of torture.

### Discussion

This study elucidates the substantial impact of the “Aspects of Trauma and Torture” conference on enhancing participants’ comprehension and cognisance of the intricate issues relevant to torture and trauma. The empirical findings demonstrate significant advancements across multiple dimensions, observed in both physical and virtual attendees, affirming the instrumental value of such events in fostering professional development and human rights advocacy. Furthermore, the conference catalysed participation in a subsequent training initiative focused on the Istanbul Protocol. These findings are consistent with existing scholarly research on the role of conferences in shaping attitudes and behaviours related to human rights (Kearns & Young, 2018; McEntire et al., 2015).

Participants reported an increase in their familiarity with the topic of torture post-conference. This perceived enhancement in familiarity suggests that the content effectively addressed knowledge deficits, equipping attendees with practical tools and a deeper understanding of the subject’s theoretical and applied dimensions. The positive correlation observed between pre-conference interest in torture and post-conference familiarity with this subject suggests that prior engagement with the topic may predispose individuals to assimilate and utilise novel information more effectively. While this underscores the significance of targeted outreach to highly motivated individuals, it presents a contrast to the broader objective of disseminating awareness of torture and the Istanbul Protocol to a wider audience.

The conference exhibited particular efficacy for psychosocial professionals, who rated its meaningfulness as markedly higher than that of attendees from other professional backgrounds. The elevated importance experienced by psychosocial professionals may reflect the immediate applicability of the content to their professional practice, particularly in contexts characterised by

trauma care and ethical dilemmas. Analogously, presenters and staff assigned more favourable ratings to the conference than other attendees, likely attributable to their greater involvement in the event and engrossment in the subject matter.

The sense of togetherness reported by attendees highlights the conference’s success in fostering community and collaboration. A discernible divergence was observed in the modalities of attendance; physical participants received ample opportunities for interpersonal interaction with like-minded professionals, whereas virtual participants were primarily confined to passive auditory engagement with the speakers. Consequently, it was unsurprising that physical participants reported significantly higher levels of perceived connectedness than their virtual counterparts, thus underscoring the critical importance of in-person interaction in cultivating professional networks and a shared sense of purpose. In retrospect, insufficient measures were taken to engage virtual participants and facilitate adequate networking opportunities. This limitation in facilitating virtual interaction is a recognised challenge inherent in hybrid conference formats (Paul Vincent & Donald, 2024), and enhanced engagement strategies for virtual attendees must be implemented in future iterations.

Participants offered positive evaluations of the conference’s significance and the professional insights gained, thereby reflecting its efficacy in addressing multidisciplinary needs spanning medical, psychosocial, and legal domains. The reported strengthening of attendees’ motivation to act against torture further elucidates the event’s role in translating knowledge into action, an indispensable component of human rights advocacy.

Analysis of open-ended responses identified key areas for improvement. Technical difficulties, specifically audio disruptions and constrained access to online sessions, emerged as a recurrent theme in participant feedback. These challenges likely contributed to the observed disparities in perceived impact between physical and virtual attendees. Mitigation of these barriers is imperative to ensuring equitable access and engagement across all participation formats. The articulated desire for extended sessions and recorded materials indicated a high valuation of the content’s depth and scope. Integration of these elements into future conferences has the potential to amplify their educational impact and broaden their reach beyond the immediate event.

Despite an open call for abstract submissions and targeted outreach to relevant professionals, the response from Palestinian professionals in the field was notably limited. Conference organisers identified several potential factors contributing to this underrepresentation. The impact of political pressure and fear of repercussions for voicing concerns on such sensitive matters is acknowledged, particularly considering the polar-

sation and often volatile discourse in Israel following October 7th (Adalah, 2023). Moreover, the distribution of the call for abstracts in Hebrew and the Tel Aviv-based venue location may have served as deterrents, resulting in an imbalance in participation. This apparent imbalance, favouring Jewish Israeli participants and presenters, may also be attributed to the conference's primary purpose of launching the Hebrew translation of the Istanbul Protocol. This underrepresentation was perceived as a missed opportunity to comprehensively address the issue, given the disproportionate impact of torture on Palestinians, especially within the context of Israeli practices. Prior experiences corroborate the observation that the participation of Palestinians in professional conferences organised by Israeli entities, even on less sensitive topics, remains a persistent concern.

This investigation underscores the pivotal role of conferences on trauma and torture in enhancing awareness and fostering collaboration across diverse professional and geographical boundaries. The congruence of these findings with global reports on the continued prevalence of torture, as disseminated by the United Nations and other international human rights organisations, emphasises the broader relevance of these issues. International frameworks like the Istanbul Protocol, designed for global implementation, facilitate a standardised approach to documenting and addressing torture. The multidisciplinary paradigm is essential in ensuring that the pursuit of torture eradication transcends regional or conflict-specific boundaries and becomes an integral part of a shared, global human rights agenda.

As evidenced by the contrasting experiences of virtual and physical attendees, hybrid conference models offer a potential bridge for international knowledge exchange and societal transformation. While in-person engagement fosters a stronger sense of community and professional rapport, virtual participation enables the inclusion of perspectives from regions where geopolitical, financial, or logistical constraints may preclude physical attendance. Future initiatives should incorporate longitudinal assessments to gauge the enduring effects on knowledge retention and professional practices. Moreover, expanding outreach to underrepresented populations and enhancing virtual participant engagement will further augment the inclusivity and efficacy of such events.

Furthermore, the limited representation of Palestinian voices raises a critical consideration for future gatherings addressing torture and other sensitive topics in varied geographical settings. Given that political pressures and security concerns may impede participation, conferences must prioritise the inclusion of marginalised and conflict-affected populations to ensure a comprehensive and holistic approach to mitigating the global impact of torture.

### *Limitations*

While this study supplies valuable insights into the impact of the "Aspects of Trauma & Torture Conference," several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualise the findings. The survey response rate was 34%, with 40 participants out of 117 attendees completing the questionnaire. This relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, certain subgroups, such as virtual participants, had lower representation in the survey, which may have skewed the comparative analysis. While the study explored differences between physical and virtual attendees, it did not account for potential confounding factors, such as technological challenges faced by virtual participants or pre-existing preferences for in-person versus online learning. These factors may have influenced the observed disparities in engagement and perceived impact.

The survey was voluntary, which may have introduced self-selection bias. Respondents may have been more engaged or satisfied with the conference than non-respondents, potentially leading to an overestimation of the conference's positive impact. The study measured immediate post-conference changes in knowledge and awareness but did not assess long-term retention or behavioural outcomes. It remains unclear whether the reported gains in familiarity and willingness to act will translate into sustained engagement or actionable change over time. Furthermore, for various reasons, we opted for questions referring to changes perceived by the participants, not actual changes in knowledge or behaviour.

While the questionnaire was comprehensive, it relied on self-reported data, which is subject to social desirability and recall biases. Although open-ended responses provided qualitative insights, the study could benefit from triangulation with additional data sources, such as questions about acquired knowledge or follow-up interviews, to deepen the understanding of participants' experiences and their motivations for learning about torture and the Istanbul Protocol.

Moreover, the conference was held in Israel and primarily addressed issues relevant to local and regional populations. While some findings may have broader applicability, cultural and contextual factors should be considered when extrapolating results to other settings.

### **Conclusion**

The present study substantiates that scholarly and professional convenings addressing trauma and torture manifest discernible short-term positive effects on participants' acquisition of knowledge, heightened awareness, and enhanced motivation for action, while concurrently cultivating a sense of community among on-site attendees. This conference functioned as a declar-

atory statement within the academic sphere, both in Israel and internationally, concerning the pervasiveness of torture and the imperative to address it across academic, pragmatic, and systemic dimensions. Notwithstanding logistical impediments and variations inherent in participation formats, the positive feedback received corroborates the event's efficacy in advancing human rights education and advocacy. The implementation of strategies to optimise virtual engagement and accessibility will enhance the conference's impact and inclusivity, thereby ensuring the efficacy of future events across diverse attendance modalities. Furthermore, the longitudinal influence of such conferences on the broader policy framework warrants assessment, particularly within the Israeli-Palestinian context, to rigorously examine the hypothesis that sustained professional education can contribute to translating international human rights standards into actionable national policies and ultimately foster enhanced accountability for acts of torture and ill-treatment perpetrated during periods of conflict. Given the enduring prominence of torture as a critical issue on the global human rights agenda, the potential role of academic conferences as agents of systemic transformation should not be underestimated. Through continuous professional education, the enhancement of cross-border collaborative initiatives, and the expansion of inclusivity, conferences can play a pivotal role in shaping the international discourse on torture, elevating its status from a regional concern to a pressing global imperative. Future research endeavours should meticulously examine the long-term impact of these educational interventions on policy and practice, particularly within conflict zones where the relevance of the Istanbul Protocol and other human rights frameworks is most exigent.

Based on participant feedback and the experiential insights gleaned from organising the "Aspects of Trauma and Torture" conference, we propose a series of recommendations to ensure that such events are meaningful, inclusive, and safe. Firstly, concerted efforts should be directed towards enhancing the inclusion of marginalised voices, with specific emphasis on those emanating from communities disproportionately affected by torture. One can achieve this by deploying multilingual calls for participation, judiciously selecting the venue, and offering flexible presentation formats. Secondly, to optimise engagement for virtual attendees, future conferences should incorporate structured opportunities for interaction, such as moderated discussion forums or virtual networking platforms. Recorded materials, transcripts, and registration fee waivers for under-resourced participants may enhance accessibility. Thirdly, recognising the emotionally charged nature of conferences focusing on torture, trauma-informed practices, including content warnings and optional emotion-

al support services, should be integrated into the program to safeguard participant well-being. Lastly, to foster sustained impact, conferences should offer pathways for ongoing professional development.

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Submitted 27th of Feb. 2025

Accepted 24th of May 2025