

# A disappointing vote by the Stellenbosch University Senate on Gaza, Palestine: A lost opportunity to show ethical and moral leadership in support of social justice

On 30 April 2024, a resolution was discussed at an extraordinary meeting of the senate of Stellenbosch University which focused on the Israel-Gaza war. The resolution stated the following:<sup>[1]</sup>

1. *Call for an immediate ceasefire and the cessation of attacks on civilians in Gaza and Israel, the passage of humanitarian aid and the return of all captives including the safe return of hostages captured by Hamas.*
2. *Condemn the destruction of the education sector in Gaza and the massive scale of killing of teachers and university staff in the current war.*
3. *Urge the international community to ensure that the provision of humanitarian aid includes the restoration of the education sector in Gaza.*
4. *Express our concern and opposition to any attempts to curtail academic freedom by labelling criticism of Israel or Zionist policies as antisemitism.*
5. *Reject the definition of antisemitism by the IHRA.*
6. *Express our support for academic colleagues in Gaza who are surviving under appalling conditions and our intention to assist in the rebuilding of the academic sector after the war.*
7. *Express our solidarity with academic colleagues victimised for their willingness to speak out against the educaracide in Gaza.*

This resolution was based on the current state of the Israel-Palestine war in Gaza which is wiping out places of healthcare and learning. The resolution failed to pass with 101 against and 80 in favour. As a result, the university lost an opportunity to break with its apartheid past in which it aided and abetted the previous South African Apartheid regime.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The facts of the war

In its judgement issued on 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) clearly stated that Israel is plausibly committing genocide in Gaza and set forth several provisional measures to stem the attacks on civilians in Gaza.<sup>[3]</sup> This conclusion was echoed by a USA judge in Oakland, California also on 26 January 2024, as part of an outcome of a lawsuit which had been launched by the Center for Constitutional Rights on 13 November 2023.<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, a report by Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian territories, concluded that the war in Gaza had met the criteria for genocide.<sup>[5]</sup> Israel has ignored the provisional measures requested by the ICJ,<sup>[6]</sup> including further measures issued on 5 April 2024.<sup>[7]</sup>

According to a United Nations report, as of 6 May 2024, 34 735 Palestinians have been reported to have been killed in Gaza, with approximately 70% being women and children.<sup>[8]</sup> This number, while accepted as being reasonably accurate in terms of bodies actually seen by the Gaza Ministry of Health,<sup>[9]</sup> is regarded as an underestimate as it does not include bodies trapped under the rubble estimated as an additional 10 000 persons.<sup>[8]</sup> Furthermore, this United Nations report has reported that 492 health workers, 254 aid workers and 142 journalists and media workers have been killed by Israeli forces<sup>[8]</sup> and this is in contravention of international humanitarian law.<sup>[10]</sup> The health system, education system, critical water and sanitation infrastructure

and residential homes in Gaza have been largely destroyed.<sup>[8]</sup> From 9 October 2023, Israel has blocked off food, water and fuel supplies to the Gaza Strip.<sup>[11]</sup> This blockade has led to 1.1 million people facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity, as aid convoys are either denied access or impeded by the Israeli authorities.<sup>[8]</sup>

An examination of the history of the conflict shows that Israel, despite claiming to be a democracy, has instituted an apartheid system of government that has oppressed and humiliated the local Palestinian population for several decades.<sup>[12,13]</sup> It has also repeatedly broken international humanitarian laws and ignored United Nations resolutions and ICJ rulings.<sup>[14-16]</sup>

It is patently obvious that what has been and is happening in Gaza (and the West Bank of Palestine) is both morally and ethically reprehensible. Israel's current actions in Gaza are opposed by most countries worldwide, as evidenced by the General Assembly vote on 12 December 2023. In this vote, 153 out of 193 countries supported an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. However, the resolution was unfortunately not adopted due to the veto of the USA.<sup>[17]</sup> There have been widespread ongoing protests in multiple countries calling for an immediate permanent ceasefire in Gaza and justice for the Palestinians. More recently, there have also been widespread student protests demanding divestment from Israeli institutions and companies that are supporting Israel's genocidal actions in Gaza.<sup>[18]</sup> The United Nations and its agencies have reported extensively on the conflict and have likewise called for an end to hostilities and a just resolution to the conflict which enables Palestinians to enjoy self-determination and peace.<sup>[19]</sup> A scientific analysis by researchers from respected academic institutions, of current trends in the war predicts the following: 'Over the next six months we project that, in the absence of epidemics, 6 550 excess deaths would occur under the ceasefire scenario, climbing to 58 260 under the status quo scenario and 74 290 under the escalation scenario. Over the same period and with the occurrence of epidemics, our projections rise to 11 580, 66 720 and 85 750, respectively.'<sup>[20]</sup> In other words, the humanitarian crisis is projected to cause more deaths than the war itself if a ceasefire is not implemented. Therefore, there is an urgent need for all of us to speak out and advocate for an end to hostilities, in particular, an end to the actions of the Israeli Defense Force, whose actions are regarded as being genocidal in nature. In support of this imperative, the United Nations Human Rights Council on 5 April 2024, adopted multiple resolutions including calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the halt of arms sales to Israel.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Responsibility of academics to shape public discourse

In the academic world, vigorous efforts are continually made to combat the spread of misinformation, especially in the sciences where clarity and accuracy are paramount.<sup>[22,23]</sup> Scholars dedicate themselves to correcting false narratives and ensuring that the public receives trustworthy information. However, when it comes

to influencing broader societal discourse, especially on contentious issues like war, there is often a noticeable retreat into silence.<sup>[24]</sup> This discrepancy undermines the very foundation of academic integrity and responsibility. If academics are committed to fighting misinformation in scientific fields, then it logically extends that they should also be engaged in dispelling myths and inaccuracies in geopolitical conflicts. Choosing silence in these discussions is not just a missed opportunity but a contradiction of the academic commitment to truth and enlightenment. Engaging actively in these debates supports the critical role that academia plays in shaping informed, ethical and progressive public policy and discourse.

Academics have a fundamental responsibility to engage with global issues such as war, given their unique position in society as educators, thinkers and influencers. Silence in the face of conflict amounts to a tacit endorsement of the status quo and can contribute to the perpetuation of injustice. The academic community is equipped with the skills to analyse complex issues critically, challenge misinformation and advocate for evidence-based solutions. By voicing informed perspectives on wars and conflicts, academics can lead public discourse, influence policy decisions and help shape a more just and peaceful world. In this way, the role of an academic extends beyond the boundaries of classrooms and publications; it involves a moral obligation to apply their knowledge and expertise to pressing global challenges, making their voices crucial in the fight for human rights and justice.

## The implications of the vote against the resolution

Remaining neutral on pressing global political issues, under the guise of preserving academic freedom, can often lead to academic disenfranchisement. True academic freedom involves the liberty to explore, discuss and take positions on a wide range of topics, including those that are politically sensitive. By choosing neutrality, institutions may inadvertently suppress important dialogues and critical debates that are fundamental to the academic spirit. This approach not only limits the intellectual growth of the academic community but also diminishes the university's role in shaping informed, conscientious citizens. Furthermore, such neutrality can be perceived as a lack of engagement or responsibility, potentially disempowering faculty and students who look to their institutions for leadership on issues of significant ethical and moral weight. Thus, embracing an active role in global discussions is not just about taking a stand,—it is about fulfilling the educational mandate to foster a deeply engaged and socially responsive academic community.

The choice by the Senate was to oppose the resolution. It begs the question of how a leadership can stand in opposition to calls for peace. The failure of Stellenbosch University leadership to support calls for an immediate end to hostilities and to align itself with the global movement for peace and justice for the Palestinians leaves it on the wrong side of history. The decision of the Stellenbosch University Senate to reject the Gaza resolution reverberates far beyond the confines of the meeting room, significantly impacting the university's internal and external relationships. Among the students and staff, there is a palpable sense of disappointment and disillusionment, particularly among those who see the university as a platform for advocating for global justice and human rights.<sup>[25]</sup> This decision affects the morale of the university community and risks

alienating academic and research partners worldwide who prioritise institutions aligned with their ethical and humanitarian values. The university must now navigate these complex waters, balancing internal convictions with its aspirations to foster an inclusive, globally respected academic environment. Such a balancing act is crucial not only for maintaining academic excellence but also for upholding the university's integrity and reputation on the world stage.

By supporting the Gaza resolution, Stellenbosch University would have sent a powerful message of its commitment to justice and peace. By endorsing the resolution, the university could have demonstrated its solidarity with those affected by the conflict and its dedication to upholding human rights and academic freedom. Such a stance could have significantly influenced public discourse and international perceptions, emphasising the role of educational institutions as moral beacons in a global society. This is particularly pertinent in a world where the actions and voices of universities can inspire change and foster a culture of peace and justice across global communities.

## We need a Senate that leads in social justice

In light of the recent Senate vote on the Gaza resolution at Stellenbosch University, it is imperative for the Senate to reconsider its stance and recognise the broader implications of its decisions on the global stage. The Senate is urged to actively engage in matters of international human rights and justice, embodying the principles of academic freedom and responsibility, as per the values and mission of the university. This is not just about revisiting a single resolution but about committing to a consistent and transparent approach in responding to global crises. By doing so, the Senate can ensure that the university does not just contribute to academic discourse but also plays a crucial role in advocating for peace and justice worldwide. It is time for the Senate to lead by example, demonstrating that academic institutions are not just centres of learning but also beacons of moral and ethical leadership in society.

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