

Report Back to the Signatories of the November 2023 Open Letter to USAf and ASSAf

Dear Colleagues and Friends

Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position, which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; 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; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship. *For an intellectual these habits of mind are corrupting par excellence. If anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits. Personally I have encountered them in one of the toughest of all contemporary issues, Palestine, where fear of speaking out about one of the greatest injustices in modern history has hobbled, blinkered, muzzled many who know the truth and are in a position to serve it. For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate intellectual.*

Edward W. Said, 'Speaking Truth to Power' in Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures, Vintage Books, 1996, pp. 100-101.

Last November we mobilized over 1000 signatures in under a week to call on USAf and ASSAf to take a clear stand on the genocide in Gaza and be unequivocally on the side of social justice.

Disappointingly, neither Universities South Africa (USAf) or the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) have yet joined the universal call for an end to the genocide in Gaza, let alone a ceasefire, the opening of channels for humanitarian aid and solidarity with Palestinian universities, scholars and students.

We find the positions of both organisations, which are meant to lead universities and science, and specifically their silence, at this time bewildering and shameful.

We believed that these calls would resonate with any persons who profess a commitment to human rights and social justice and that they would readily align themselves with national and global voices calling for an end to the brutal genocide in Gaza.

The death toll on 19 February stood at close to 30 000, excluding 8000 people missing presumably buried under the rubble with about 70 000 severely injured. This is almost 5% of Gaza's population - the equivalent of 3.25 million South Africans. 75% of those killed are children and women.

Gaza's universities have been bombed to rubble and thousands of students and scores of scholars killed, part of an ongoing 'scholasticide', a 'pattern of Israeli colonial attacks on Palestinian scholars, students and educational institutions' that is 'intimately connected to genocide.'

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has pronounced, almost unanimously, that there is sufficient evidence for the genocide case against Israel to proceed. The heads of major international humanitarian organisations such as Amnesty International and Oxfam have expressed their strong concern on recent 'harrowing developments in Rafah', including mass starvation and the possibility of famine and the outbreak of epidemics.

Despite this, the collective leadership of universities and science in South Africa remain shamefully and deafeningly silent.

USAF's response to the Open Letter on 21 December 2023 claims that it could not issue a statement on the Gaza genocide because 'some members' opted 'to not support any statement or action, while others supported the principle of a statement condemning the situation associated with human rights abuses and social justice infringements' and because "a number of colleagues...have not expressed a view on this".

We thank those universities that have issued principled statements. The University of Fort Hare Council statement, to cite one example, provides the kind of moral and political leadership that one hoped USAf and ASSAf would provide.

We must express great dismay that, in the face of overwhelming evidence of genocide and human rights atrocities, many vice-chancellors cannot even support the collective call for a ceasefire in Gaza and that some remain reticent to pronounce on this matter of huge historical significance.

We appreciate that some vice-chancellors are concerned that expressing solidarity with the people of Palestine could negatively impact on donor funding to their universities, especially from foundations, governments and individuals in the global north.

We acknowledged there may well be a price to be paid for calling for a ceasefire and social justice for Palestinians. But, currently, to be hostage to actual or perceived threats of an end to donor funding is to elevate narrow institutional interests above the sanctity of human life, the basic tenet of academic freedom and principles of human rights and social justice. These are values and principles that any self-respecting, credible university teaches its students.

As South Africans who suffered the horrors of apartheid, we are all too aware that immense costs are incurred in fighting for freedom and justice. Those costs were also borne however by people in other lands who stood in solidarity with us in the face of injustice.

Any price to be potentially paid by our universities and science institutions regarding donor funding must be weighed against the far greater price of remaining silent. And especially when we in South Africa, through the Constitutional right to academic freedom, can express our views openly and freely without fear of repression.

This is not the case in many countries now, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France and especially Germany, where the open assaults on academic freedom have debilitating implications for teaching, research, critical scholarship and debate

We requested an urgent online meeting with the USAf executive or the chair of the USAf Board and the chief executive officer. We wished to hear from them what made it so *difficult* for USAf to take a stand on the Gaza genocide and whether there was any prospect of USAf changing its stance.

USAf responded that 'The matter of issuing a USAf statement on the Gaza conflict and declaring its solidarity with Palestine had been thoroughly debated by the USAf Executive Committee (Exco). Despite a shared commitment to principles of justice and humanity, a consensus could not be reached on issuing a collective statement.'

USAf observed that ‘individual universities were expressing their views independently as they deem appropriate and were not keen on being bound by a collective statement that might misrepresent them or their institutions. It should also be noted that the USAf Board, upon solicitation of views, was not in support of a collective USAf statement.’

The USAf Exco declined the request for a meeting and deems ‘the matter as concluded.’ The USAf response finally noted that ‘it is important to recognise that the lack of a collective statement does not imply a lack of commitment to justice and human rights by USAf as a whole.’

The USAf response deserves a rejoinder. First, we are told that there is ‘a shared commitment to principles of justice and humanity’; but that paradoxically, ‘a consensus could not be reached on issuing a collective statement.’

If consensus cannot be reached, it must surely cast doubt on the ‘shared commitment to principles of justice and humanity.’ Ultimately it is not principles alone on which we are judged but the actual practice of such principles.

Second, the university leaders who constitute USAf sadly, for reasons that are not explicated and so cannot be intellectually interrogated, *do not* support a collective statement on a global issue of utmost significance for human rights and social justice.

Is it credible one may reasonably ask that such universities, which are the sites of engagement on knowledge, have nothing but silence to offer as institutions in response to the world historic ICJ ruling and its serious implications?

In the light of this fact, the statement that ‘it is important to recognise that the lack of a collective statement does not imply a lack of commitment to justice and human rights by USAf as a whole’ is hollow.

In failing to seriously weigh the implications of remaining silent in the context of our constitutional values and imperatives, the USAf position raises the question of how seriously we take our national values as embodied in our constitution.

It is regrettable that USAf has, simultaneously, forsaken the opportunity to provide international leadership in the university sector in the way that the South African government and civil society has done with the ICJ application.

Universities claim to play a key role in advancing critical citizenship. Regrettably, USAf’s silence means that it has failed its responsibility to promote the critical citizenship that is the basis for a vibrant and democratic society. If anything, it could suggest that material considerations rather than life and human rights are more significant.

The USAf stance must raise serious questions about its moral fibre, courage and fundamental commitment to human rights and social justice, *practically* as opposed to rhetorically, and its capability to boldly lead publicly. Ironically, USAf has identified ‘leadership’ as one of its three urgent challenges!

Considering our own past and the extensive international solidarity that was extended to us during apartheid repression, one would have hoped that USAf would be in the forefront of

reciprocating the principle of international solidarity to Palestinian universities, scholars and students, demanding an end to the scholasticide and joining hands with other institutions to support scholars and students as has happened in other instances. Even here, USAf has fallen short.

After weeks of silence, ASSAf responded a few days ago that they take the Open Letter submitted to it seriously. Following a recent Council meeting, they have begun a substantive process for the Academy to guide it in developing its position.

The matter may be considered ‘concluded’ by USAf, but it is hardly concluded and avoidable for the thousands of Palestinians whose lives are threatened daily and for those who stand for social justice locally and globally, given the ongoing genocide, the increasing Israeli incursions and pogroms in the West Bank and Israel’s dismissal of the interim ruling of the ICJ.

History, we are convinced, will judge harshly the silence of the current leadership bodies of South African universities and science in the same way we contemptuously view those university leaderships who remained silent during our struggle against apartheid.

Notwithstanding the inexcusable USAf stance, we are inspired by the Palestine Solidarity groupings of staff and students that are active and expanding on many campuses. In the weeks to come there will be ongoing organization building and intensified mobilization on campuses and greater national coordination.

We call on students and scholars and human rights and social justice organizations at every university to urgently:

- Request a meeting with the vice-chancellor.
- Ask his/her position on the Palestine genocide and scholasticide.
- Ask about her/his position on the USAf silence.
- Enquire whether the university plans to express a view at all.
- Use the governance structures of the university to engage the matter of the University’s position on the Palestine genocide and scholasticide and of institutional links and collaborations with Israeli universities that are complicit in the genocide.
- Campaign for solidarity and collaboration with Palestinian universities, scholars and students, and active engagement with their needs.

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