



Check for updates



The illusion of university neutrality in the face of global conflicts

AUTHOR:

Jonathan Jansen¹

AFFILIATION:

¹Education Policy Studies, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Jonathan Jansen

EMAIL:

jonathanjansen@sun.ac.za

HOW TO CITE:

Jansen J. The illusion of university neutrality in the face of global conflicts. *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(3/4), Art. #20807. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/20807>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:

global conflict, institutional neutrality, academic freedom, social justice

PUBLISHED:

7 March 2025



Significance:

Our universities can play a critical role in demonstrating *how* we can respond to global conflicts. Universities are, by their very nature, political and not neutral. Academic freedom is an *institutional* commitment to the defence of the principle in the public arena. A university that stays silent in the face of a staggering loss of human life would have to revisit their commitment to social justice.

I appreciate the reasoned approach offered by Professor Chetty, a dean of science, in the Commentary entitled ‘Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world?’¹, as his position invites engagement on an explosive issue on campuses: the horrendous conflict in the Middle East. Though admittedly difficult, I will respond on the terms of the invitation and start with what we can agree on.

Agreed, the university is principally a place of ideas. Our responses to the tragedy of Gaza and surrounds should be thought through rather than impulsive. A principled approach is vital, and this should come through critical dialogue and reasoned debate in this special kind of institution – the university. And yes, the academic community has been relatively silent on other conflicts, such as those unfolding in the Sudan and the DRC, but less so on the conflict in the Palestinian territories.

That said, there are some foundational weaknesses in the arguments tabled. First, to call responses to Gaza “an essentially political matter [brought] into a university discussion” in ways that “force a decision when there is little consensus” is disingenuous. Universities are, by their very nature, political. We decide who comes in and who is left out. We choose the content of curricula, and, from a universe of knowledge, we select what counts as official knowledge and what does not. We decide every year in our institutional budgets what is worth funding and what will be overlooked for financial support; there are core and ancillary budgets. In their essence, universities at home and abroad are inescapably political institutions; ask historians like Paul Maylam², who has gifted us a brilliant account of the historiography of South African universities.

Furthermore, the argument that “academic freedom is practised on an individual basis” is conceptually flawed. As the foremost South African scholar on the subject remarked, such a position “[confuses] the individual right to free speech with the institutional practice of academic freedom” (Higgins J, personal communication, 21 November 2024). Academic freedom lectures, birthed in the furnace of apartheid, remain an *institutional* commitment to the defence of the principle in the public arena.

Which brings me to the elephant in the room. If one applied, straightforwardly, Chetty’s principles of good governance to the evil of apartheid, they would sound rather hollow. Imagine taking positions on what the United Nations called “a crime against humanity” by seeking “equally valid views” or straining ourselves “not to be driving disunity” among our academic colleagues, or that making a political statement would amount to “playing into the hands of extremists on both sides”. Of course those would be ridiculous standpoints given the nature of the crime in question.

I would make a counterargument, which is that a university that says nothing in the face of genocide played out right before our eyes has lost all credibility in the face of its students, staff and communities. The prestigious medical journal *Lancet* estimates that more than 186 000 people have been killed – a figure that includes indirect deaths through starvation. More than 12 000 children have been blown to death, with more than 25 000 of them having lost a parent or being orphaned, apart from thousands more without limbs. A university that stays silent in the face of such a staggering loss of human life would have to revisit their mission statements that often include commitments to social justice.

Institutional neutrality, as some have argued, is a moot point precisely because the modern university has never been neutral on the most significant moral issues of the day, whether it is the protection of a supposed meritocracy in admissions or the US investment of federal government dollars in engineering departments for military purposes; we make political choices all the time.

Commenting on the neutrality principle, John Higgins is again persuasive:

The neutrality principle seeks to make the university a space outside of politics.

Yet,

In practice, as the politics of academic freedom in apartheid South Africa showed ... all too often this principle can be the cover for a vehemently partial and politicized response. Neutrality can be action with consequences. (Personal communication, 21 November 2024)

Of course, there are conflicts the world over. Yet even if institutional restraint prevents a university from being sucked into every global crisis, I agree with Janet Halley of Harvard Law School that “...there will be times when a commitment to neutrality will have to be overridden in the interests of making a statement on an issue of contemporary controversy”³.



Surely the scale of the genocide in Gaza, with its norm-shifting consequences for the conduct of war and how we value human life on the planet, is one such time.

There is, parenthetically, a deeper crisis at play here and that is our inability to cry twice. When 7 October 2023 happened, my Muslim academic friends were largely silent in the face of the Hamas attacks which led to the deaths and hostage taking of mainly Jewish people. When Israel retaliated with months of bombings of Palestinian people, my Jewish friends (not all of them) took up defensive postures or said nothing at all. The reason is simple: we take sides and we dig into positions for historical reasons.

Those who remember the Holocaust and the enormous loss carry within themselves and across generations the sense of an existential crisis which lingers in the mind and is triggered by every anti-Semitic act or utterance, one that never quite goes away.

Those who remember the incessant attacks of successive governments of Israel on the very existence of Palestinians over decades mark 7 October, not as a single act of resistance, but a long and inconclusive struggle for self-determination.

There is a way out of these staked-out positions if we recognise that there is a humanity that precedes politics. Our ability to be moved by the oppression of others, regardless of who is suffering or dying, is what makes us essentially human. The doctor on the battlefield is unlikely to ask who the combatant is fighting for in order to decide whether to treat the wounded person or not. The car hijacker, seriously wounded in a shoot-out with police, is kept alive until the ambulance arrives.

"I am Jewish", reads one poster, "and that is why I care about the killings in Gaza". More than one Arab diplomat in the United Nations asked questions like, "Are we not also human?" Or, "Do our lives also count?" To say that there is a humanity that precedes politics is not to argue for moral equivalence in this Middle East conflict. Here we might depart from each other in the understanding of political and historical facts. I, for one, believe that the Palestinians are on the receiving end of a brutal oppression by the Israeli government – something that has continued for decades.

But my argument for crying twice is to bring the recognition of the ongoing suffering of the Israelis and the Palestinians into the foreground, both as a matter of shared humanity and also one of strategic importance. By the latter, I mean that, unless we recognise the essential humanity of those on both sides of the conflict, there are no grounds (or very little) to begin a conversation that resolves such a deep and emotional problem. Put differently, to wipe out the other side requires that they be demonised and presented as less human, deprived of all human value. Think about ethnic stereotyping in the run-up to the Rwandan genocide, or racial stereotyping in the hands of the apartheid masters.

This is where our universities can play a critical role in demonstrating *how* we can respond to global conflicts. There are some simple public positions which university leaderships could take that risk minimal backlash. *Call for a ceasefire in Gaza*. Believe it or not, even such a simple, humanitarian statement had difficulty passing the decency test in some university senates.

A more complete statement would condemn the killings and kidnappings of 7 October initiated by Hamas and at the same time condemn the ongoing genocide that seems to have no other purpose than murdering and maiming Palestinians by the tens of thousands. Even in this hopelessly asymmetrical war, a recognition of the violence from both

sides of the conflict would be an honest assessment of the situation on the ground. Going further, the statement would include the fact that the oppression of the Palestinians did not start on 7 October. Such a balanced announcement that recognises historical facts is what the original UN statement got right.

The intriguing question that follows is this: Can a university make a statement that does not speak for all its stakeholders or constituents of the academy? Of course it can. Admittedly, there are antisemites on our campuses as there are Islamophobes. No official university statement, whether it is on racial justice or transgender rights, will ever carry the consent of all campus citizens. That is where the quality and morality of the university leadership matters, led by the vice-chancellor and their team. Make a statement based on humanitarian values, such as contained in university mission statements and threaded through our constitution, and take the flack.

I will not pretend that doing so is easy. In the United States of America, even private universities are being hounded by Congress, that performative arena of Trumpian politics, with presidents losing their jobs, including Claudine Gay of Harvard, for being less than clear about what they would do to defend conservative interests. The mechanism for dislodging leaders is a powerful one – rightwing donors threaten and actually deliver on their threats to withdraw hundreds of millions of dollars in donations which, in the case of private universities, would sink an institution within three or four budget cycles. Retrenchments follow, institutional reputations take a hammering, and public confidence in a university begins to wane.

Donor money has come to play an outsized role in tempering any kind of politics in which university leadership takes a public stand on injustice. Having sat in that hot seat through multiple crises, I know the strain on leadership when faced with difficult choices in the public domain. But I also understand, that in the face of one of the greatest human tragedies of the century, not to take a leadership stand is to side with injustice. Or in the words of the acclaimed Palestinian scholar Edward Said: "To enter into the public sphere means not being afraid of controversy or taking positions."⁴

Such a stance would certainly apply to South Africa's 26 public universities.

Declarations

I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

References

1. Chetty N. Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world? *S Afr J Sci*. 2025;121(3/4), Art. #19349. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/19349>
2. Maylam P. Writing the history of South African universities: Trends and themes. *S Afr J High Educ*. 2024;38(4):190–208. <https://doi.org/10.2085/3/38-4-5422>
3. Powell A. Should universities be taking official stances on political, social issues of the day?. *Harvard Gazette*. 2024 March 06. Available from: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2024/03/should-universities-be-taking-official-stances-on-political-social-issues-of-day/>
4. Mukhtarov F. Should universities take a stand during crises? *Water, Society & Policy*. 2024 August 23. Available from: <https://www.policytranslation.eu/should-universities-take-a-stand-during-crisis/>