

December 2, 2023

To: The Committee on Education and the Workforce

From: MIT Coalition Against Apartheid, MIT Jews 4 Ceasefire

Subject: Letter for the Record re: Hearing on “Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and Confronting Antisemitism”

Dear Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee:

As MIT students pushing for a safe, democratic, and open campus community, we write today to share our perspective of recent events on MIT’s campus in relation to the Israel-Hamas War. As you hear from MIT President Sally Kornbluth at the December 5 hearing “Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and Confronting Antisemitism”, we hope you keep in mind the student perspective as well. We are a diverse group of students who stand for our, and everyone’s, freedom to speak and protest peacefully on college campuses, free from the fear or threat of violence and hatred, whether targeted against our Jewish, Muslim, Arab, or other communities.

In this letter, we share student experiences at MIT in the recent weeks and months, our steadfast belief in the importance of free speech and diversity on college campus, our perspective on antisemitism and criticism of Israel, and a timeline of events surrounding the November 9 sit-on on MIT’s campus, events which has been spun repeatedly to tell a misleading narrative. The main points we want to get across in this letter are the following:

1. There is a movement on campus to brand criticism of the state of Israel as antisemitic. Many students, including Jewish students, are hurt by this movement. It prevents MIT from effectively targeting true hatred of, and threats to, Jewish people and also limits valid criticism of Israel.
 - Jewish students in the MIT Jews for Ceasefire group have reported that they generally feel safe on campus, but have felt targeted by pro-Israeli students with antisemitic comments.
 - Many pro-Palestinian students, both Jewish and otherwise, on campus have reported feeling threatened, socially ostracized, and targeted. There is a wider network of people within MIT working to recruit those outside of MIT to punish MIT students for speaking in favor of Palestine.
 - Free speech is a critical part of MIT’s history and character. It is also a fundamental cornerstone of democracy, something students as young adults are coming to learn about.
 - Students are expressing themselves peacefully and with the intention to gain and spread knowledge. This is ultimately the goal of an educational institution and must be protected.

2. A correction of what has become a misleading narrative of what happened on MIT's campus on November 9:
 - Students protested peacefully via a sit-in in Lobby 7, a highly symbolic and high traffic lobby of MIT that is open to the public.
 - Protesters remained non-violent but were met with counter protesters who spoke hatefully (e.g., calling protesters terrorists) and physically intimidated students through snatching posters, throwing posters, and shoving students.
 - Previously, Lobby 7 had been used numerous times, both in the last year and in the long-term history of MIT, as a site for protest and mass gatherings.

Student experiences at MIT

In the weeks since October 7th, there have been several peaceful anti-war vigils and protests on MIT's campus. The MIT administration has attempted to silence this movement through new, arbitrary protest policies, use of police to block entrance, and threats of academic suspension. Students at MIT who advocate for Palestine have faced intimidation and ostracization to various degrees from administration, faculty, and fellow students. A graduate student stated "As a Jewish MIT student, I feel silenced, unsafe, and unwelcome as a direct result of MIT's lack of acknowledgement for anything other than pro-Israel Jewish sentiment." Another student reported that they were told by members of their dorm and study groups that they are no longer welcome, for expressing concern about the ongoing bombing campaign in Gaza. One student in the coalition for Palestine remarked "As someone who supports Palestine, ... I no longer feel comfortable in class because I know that some of my classmates will harass me without any consequences" Students have been called [terrorists](#) by fellow students. One student reported receiving a message on Instagram from another MIT student saying 'F*** you for supporting terrorism and kidnapping kids and elderly disabled women and the killing of my literal school friends.' Students have also reported former members of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) threatening to "come after" every other MIT student who criticizes Israel, and teaching assistants and professors photographing and videotaping their students when engaging in protests. These recordings are being used to threaten academic and professional retaliation for engaging in protests, or to publicly reveal students' identities online, and call on external actors to make these students "unemployable."

During the sit-in in Lobby 7 on November 9th, counter protesters made antisemitic remarks directed at Jewish students participating in the sit-in. Members of MIT Jews for Ceasefire have stated that they were told "God made a mistake by having you born a Jew" and called both Hamas and "self-hating". An MIT graduate student, stated "As a Jewish student at MIT I have faced real antisemitism on campus, but I have felt nothing but empowered by the anti-war coalition of students on campus calling for a ceasefire and an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine ... Weaponizing false claims of antisemitism seriously endangers our rights to free

speech and creates a hostile environment where we do not focus our attention on real cases of antisemitism.” In addition to verbal remarks, pro-Israeli counter protesters physically assaulted students during the sit-in, stole the anti-war students’ posters and threw them at people, and reached across police barriers in an attempt to enact more violence, as described in the timeline below.

Importance of free speech and right to protest on college campuses

Open criticism within university spaces can prevent morally repugnant entanglements and enable evaluation of existing financial engagements at universities. Two examples of moral causes for divestment are disengagement from the MIT-Skoltech Program in response to the Ukraine war, and divestment from Sudan in response to the genocide in Darfur. MIT’s more recent history highlights the importance of speech and the right to protest: In 2020, when it was revealed that MIT had accepted funds from convicted criminal Jeffrey Epstein, students and faculty engaged in often uncomfortable and time-consuming public debates, Q&A sessions, and other venues for discourse to create a better path forward and hold administrators accountable. Without open dialogue, these kinds of involvements could have continued, making MIT complicit in human rights abuses.

Civil disobedience is a vital component of college campuses. Students are in a unique position to criticize the actions of the powerful and well-connected, due to their proximity to knowledge creation and their academic freedoms. Student activism has a rich history precisely because students are people who want not only to lead the advancement of science and technology, but also to apply these tools to create a [better world](#). At MIT, we are a community who, in the 1960-70s, [protested en-masse to demand immediate withdrawal from Vietnam](#) and successfully lobbied MIT to [divest from the Department of Defense sponsored Instrumentation Lab](#); who, in the 1980-90s, [built a shantytown in front of the Student Center](#) to draw awareness to [MIT Corporation’s investments in the apartheid regime in South Africa](#); who, in recent years, [held a 116 day long sit-in](#) in the Infinite Corridor to demand that the university cut fossil fuel holdings from its endowment.

Today, [students at MIT are calling](#) on the Institute to divest from financial and military collaborations that aid a decades-long occupation to systematically degrade, displace, and destroy the lives of countless Palestinians. Through protest and dissenting speech, students and faculty continue to call for a systematic process to evaluate institutional involvements in the Middle East on a consistent ethical and moral framework. Lobby 7 was chosen as the venue for a demonstration because of its high visibility and high traffic, with a large percentage of our MIT community passing through every day. Organizers wanted the demonstration to be visible, especially at a time when silence and invisibility only add to our complicity within US institutions. It must also be noted that there is a rich history of student demonstrations in Lobby

7, from a dining reform protest in 2010, a BlackHack die-in in 2019, to a police brutality speak-out in 2023. Lobby 7 is akin to the town square of MIT. As students of history and as a coalition that is constantly inspired by the work of the MIT activists that came before us, Lobby 7 was chosen to honor this tradition of student protest and to visibly call attention to the war crimes being waged against Palestinians.

Universities are often the first place young adults become aware of the inner workings of a large bureaucracy. Washington is distant, but the actions and words of peers at school are not. Protest, dissent, and advocacy within the university are how students learn and observe the workings of democracy in action. Academic rights, such as the right to reserve space in the university, to publish, to put up informational posters, to protest in public spaces, and to have unbiased access to information, enable truth-seeking and truth-telling. Students advocating for causes within their universities are tomorrow's public intellectuals and government officials. **A university without the right to speech and protest would be a place that teaches acquiescence to the interests of the powerful, not a place where human knowledge is advanced and individuals can speak truth to power.**

Importance and value of diversity of people on campus

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are fundamental cornerstones of academic excellence and achievement. Engaging with people who have different backgrounds, identities, and views is what gives rise to developing our own ideas and bringing about new questions that advance our society. As academics, we often face disagreement among our peers in regards to our personal, cultural, or religious views. It is, however, the nature of an academic institution to foster healthy dialogue that addresses these disagreements in order to progress, not to quell or threaten certain views from being spoken. The preservation of MIT's academic prestige, and to a larger extent the United States' commitment to prevent the "abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble," is critically dependent on the acceptance and inclusion of different perspectives. This is as true now as it was when students galvanized the civil rights movements in the 1960s.

In 2022, President Kornbluth stated that "MIT has never been more excellent, and MIT has never been more diverse, and I see these factors as inextricably intertwined. I'm dismayed by anything that threatens that because that threatens our mission, and it threatens our ability to prepare the next generation of leaders for our multiracial society." Never has this statement been truer, yet this threat is now being brought again to our institutions in the form of suppression of criticism of another sovereign nation across the world. Our nation's demographic and voters are becoming increasingly diverse, which is a welcome fact to not only our academic institutions, but also our most prominent companies and military, where it is believed diversity adds to their strength.

Their viewpoints, backgrounds, and opinions, must, therefore, be acknowledged and uplifted, rather than suppressed and vilified.

On antisemitism and criticism of Israel

We, the letter writers, are deeply concerned by the rise in antisemitism, as well as the rise in Islamophobia and anti-Arab hate throughout the nation. The recent shooting of three college students in Vermont weighs heavily on our minds at this time. It is crucial to differentiate between on the one hand, criticism of Israel and Palestine, and on the other antisemitism and islamophobia. Antisemitism and islamophobia should be condemned and prosecuted anywhere they occur, but criticism of Israel or Palestine cannot be suppressed without undermining the very pillars of our democracy. To criticize Israel's military, social, and political repression of Palestinians, or political Zionism and its agenda, is to join the ranks of academic scholars from MIT and beyond, along with many renowned human rights organizations. Criticism of Israel's unjust and unlawful actions cannot, and must not, be conflated with criticism or persecution of Jewish people, just as criticism and debate on our own government's actions is not conflated with an attack on the American people. To the contrary, we take pride in the fact that American democracy allows and empowers our right to free speech.

Regarding the safety and support of Jewish students at MIT, two orthodox Jewish students [penned an article](#) in which they express that "Since October 7, ... if anything, the Institute's support for its Jewish students has only gotten stronger," and "Despite all the media coverage, campus life has, for the most part, remained the same. Jewish students have continued attending their classes and going about their day with minimal interruption." We commend MIT and President Kornbluth for their role in ensuring protections for Jewish students.

However, we are deeply concerned with attempts to weaponize allegations of antisemitic hate-speech to stifle dissent and silence speech that may be controversial, but well-within the bounds of academic and university guidelines. Many on campus, assembled under the MIT Israel Alliance, are advocating the use of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. The IHRA contends that "claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" falls under this umbrella of antisemitism. The IHRA conflates many forms of criticism of the state of Israel with antisemitism. This sets a dangerous precedent in which nation-states and governments can avoid valid criticism and intellectual scrutiny.

MIT Jews for Ceasefire are calling for a rejection of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and adoption of the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. The Jerusalem Declaration states: "Criticizing or opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism, or arguing for a variety of constitutional arrangements for Jews and Palestinians in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean...on the face of it, are not antisemitic (whether or not one approves of the view or action)." It goes on to say "It is not antisemitic to point out systematic racial

discrimination. In general, the same norms of debate that apply to other states and to other conflicts over national self-determination apply in the case of Israel and Palestine. Thus, even if contentious, it is not antisemitic, in and of itself, to compare Israel with other historical cases, including settler-colonialism or apartheid.”

We strongly believe that criticism of Israel’s actions is not only justified but necessary. One student in the coalition for Palestine remarked: “Equality for some is not equality, and none of us are free until we all are: Palestinian or Jewish.” Another MIT graduate student and alumni stated “A commitment to stop what happened to European Jews, including many members of my own family, from ever happening again to anyone is at the core of my Jewish identity. I fight for the Palestinian people because I believe that Jewish liberation is connected to the liberation of all people and that the world, we should strive for is one in which all people live with freedom and dignity. I never feel more Jewish than when I am fighting for Palestinians, specifically because it requires a real commitment to that belief. It erases my Jewish identity to assert that protests at MIT calling for Palestinians to have full rights between the river and the sea are antisemitic and endangering Jewish students.”

Timeline of events surrounding the Lobby 7 sit-in:

Nov 8 at 2:53 PM: Suzy Nelson, Dean of Student Life, sends an [email](#) to all students saying: “You may not disrupt living, working, and learning spaces at MIT.” “The only approved protest venues are the following outdoor spaces...” “Failure to comply with these regulations will result in referral to the Committee on Discipline”. The day of the protest is predicted to be cold and rainy. Outdoor protest venues require advance booking.

Nov. 9th 8:00 AM: Protesters sit quietly. Counter protesters start to arrive, also quietly.

9:00 AM-9:30 AM: Escalation. [Counter protesters forced their way through the student marshalls](#) (orange-vested students) and protesters. [Counter protesters are held back by MIT Police and push through police as well.](#)

9:50-11:50 AM: Increase of shouting. Protesters report being trampled whilst sitting. Verbal abuse by counter protesters.

11:55 AM: MIT Letters that warn of suspension are handed out to some protesters and counter protesters (“less than half”) who were inside Lobby 7. Some students doubt the validity and origin of the letter. There is no signature or letter head. Counter protesters leave.

12:15 PM: Protesters largely remain. Clear egress paths through protesters are maintained.

Around 2:50 PM: Additional protesters arrive, transitioning from a different protest across town to join the Lobby 7 demonstration– they all sit down. Another counter protester enters with an Israeli flag and takes pictures; he is peacefully escorted out of lobby 7.

4:55 PM: More police presence arrived at Lobby 7. MIT sends out an MIT advisory to the entire MIT community that “Please avoid Lobby 7 due to an ongoing demonstration. Seek alternate routes. Beginning at 5pm, MIT Main Group buildings will be accessible via MIT ID card only.”

Around 5:00 PM: Protest Organizers announce that protesters should stay for a press conference at 7. MIT closes Lobby 7, a space that MIT proudly keeps open to the public. Police at all entrances let people leave but not reenter.

This includes students trying to use the restroom. No student is allowed to pass through either. Police block lobby 7 in a way that protesters never did.

7:14 PM: Protesters are allowed to use the restroom if they accept an escort.

8:00 PM: Speech by the MIT Coalition Against Apartheid organization to all protesters stating their desire to end the MIT Lockheed Martin MISTI program and Seed Fund.

9:05 PM: Protest is finished. Those still in attendance help clean up Lobby 7 and go home.

10:32 PM: Email from Sally Kornbluth, President of MIT. “the students who remained after the deadline will be suspended from non-academic campus activities”

Nov. 10th 10:00 AM: Student-organized lecture series on Palestine canceled by police blocking entrance to previously reserved classroom.

Appendix

Full timeline: [NOVEMBER 9TH LOBBY 7 PROTEST TIMELINE](#)

Additional videos: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/15PlvYHC_tSZ-BWuFWmeo4Ccig1y12n9M

Report on current conditions at MIT: https://docs.google.com/document/u/2/d/e/2PACX-1vQqEdTqipNw4XdNTNgDchnmY8hN941buAU-BoBWou1uusE0L8vy0Bvx3iwbFjx4WOWuuxLJF4YCTAwJ/pub?fbclid=IwAR1ygla_VsZmfoLCgnAARJEEQq1cph_qnE3ScOCJIBYZx_B3LALdPkKUmPQ