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Studies  
Association**  
of North America, Inc

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

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16 November 2024

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Dear President Kornbluth and Colleagues:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern about the recent disciplinary action by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) against one of its doctoral students, Prahlad Iyengar, for speech activities protected by the university's own free expression and academic freedom policies, which generally align with the First Amendment. Our concern is further heightened by MIT's record of sanctioning Iyengar for other pro-Palestine activism since the spring 2024 semester as well as its repression of pro-Palestine speech and assembly on campus since 7 October 2023.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the prestigious *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and outside of North America.

On 1 November 2024, the MIT administration sent Iyengar a letter informing him that he had been banned from campus and from accessing any building owned or leased by MIT, and prohibited from contacting several members of the MIT community. In taking these measures against Iyengar without affording him due process, the university cited two incidents that it claimed constituted violations of MIT policies. The first

involves an email message that Iyengar sent on 24 October 2024 to fellow graduate students working in the lab of MIT Professor Daniela Rus. The message sought to explain the context behind a pro-Palestine protest directed at Professor Rus’s lab two days earlier. In his email, Iyengar described the protest as a response to Professor Rus’s decision to take on “projects sponsored by the Ministry of Defense of Israel,” notwithstanding Israel’s “genocide against Palestinians in Gaza” and other actions in the Middle East. In his message Iyengar made clear that he did not intend to “shame or intimidate” the email’s recipients, but rather wanted to “offer support” and a “safe space” for those students who wanted “to brainstorm ways” to address “the pressing issue[s]” created by Professor Rus’s work. While MIT asserts that this email message violated its [harassment](#) policy, it is hard to see how it can be reasonably characterized as intimidating, hostile or abusive to anyone. The fact that Mr. Iyengar sent just one email message offers further evidence that his action can be deemed neither “severe” nor “pervasive,” as is required by the university’s definition of “harassment.”

The second incident which MIT has cited to justify its sanctioning of Iyengar involves an article that he wrote and published in the MIT-recognized student zine *Written Revolution*. The article, titled “[On Pacifism](#),” is an extended scholarly discussion of the place of pacifism in pro-Palestine activism. While MIT claims that the article “could be interpreted as a call for more violent or destructive forms of protest at MIT,” Iyengar neither calls for violence nor suggests that students at MIT engage in violent activity. MIT has also expressed concerns about the article’s “inclusion of symbolism from a U.S.-designated terrorist organization containing violent imagery,” referring to two images (out of four in the article) that feature the emblem of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a U.S.-government designated terrorist organization. MIT has not explained how the inclusion of such images violates relevant MIT [policy](#) by threatening or endangering any person on campus, as the policy specifies; nor does the article’s content provide any objective basis for concluding that any person could be threatened, intimidated or coerced by it.

Notwithstanding MIT’s suggestions to the contrary, Iyengar’s email message and article – indisputably forms of expressive activity – fall squarely within his right to free expression and academic freedom, as articulated by MIT’s own policies and rules. For example, in its [Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom](#) the university proudly affirms that, “with a tradition of celebrating provocative thinking, controversial views, and nonconformity, MIT unequivocally endorses the principles of freedom of expression and academic freedom.” The statement goes on to note that “[f]ree expression promotes creativity by affirming the

ability to exchange ideas without constraints” and that it is “enhanced by the doctrine of academic freedom, which protects both intramural and extramural expression without institutional censorship or discipline.” [MIT’s Values Statement](#) reiterates these principles, proclaiming that “[b]ecause learning is nourished by a diversity of views, we cherish free expression, debate, and dialogue in pursuit of truth...”

While some members of the MIT community may have been offended or distressed by Iyengar’s email message and article, according to the university’s own policies those feelings cannot be used to deprive Iyengar of his right to express his opinions on matters of public and scholarly concern. Indeed, MIT’s [Hand and Mind Book](#) notes that “in an academic community, the free and open exchange of ideas and viewpoints reflected in the concept of academic freedom may sometimes prove disturbing or offensive to some,” but “[t]he examination and challenging of assumptions, beliefs or opinions is...[nevertheless] intrinsic to the rigorous education that MIT strives to provide.”

We note that this is not the first time that MIT has sought to curtail Iyengar’s free expression on matters related to Palestine. Since the spring 2024 semester, MIT has subjected him to various instances of harassment and punishment for expressing a pro-Palestine viewpoint, including subjecting him to disciplinary measures for conducting a peaceful exchange with representatives of weapons manufacturer Lockheed Martin at an on-campus career fair earlier this semester.

More broadly, we are concerned that MIT’s actions against Iyengar are only one of many repressive measures taken by the university against pro-Palestinian advocacy since 7 October 2023. These measures include MIT’s decision to interim [suspend](#) pro-Palestine student protestors and [bar](#) them from campus in May 2024 without [due process](#), including prohibiting them from accessing [student housing and receiving monthly graduate worker stipends](#); the administration’s general pursuit of aggressive [investigations, interrogations and other disciplinary actions](#) against pro-Palestine students over the past year; and its decision to [suspend](#) the main pro-Palestine student organization at MIT, the Coalition Against Apartheid (CAA), and the revocation of CAA’s [web domain](#). These actions have led both [students](#) and [faculty](#) at MIT to conclude that the university is systematically singling out pro-Palestine viewpoints for repression and sanction.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has recently [called attention](#) to the alarming expansion of restrictive policies that intimidate and silence faculty and students, especially those voicing their principled opposition to Israel’s genocidal assault on the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank. As the AAUP puts it, “[a]dministrators who



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claim that ‘expressive activity’ policies protect academic freedom and student learning, even as they severely restrict its exercise, risk destroying the very freedoms of speech and expression they claim to protect.”

The systematic repression of pro-Palestine voices, which has become an undeniable reality across U.S. colleges and universities since 7 October 2023, has severely undermined the integrity, autonomy and mission of this country’s institutions of higher education. Instead of following other universities down this dangerous road, we urge MIT to change course and adhere to its avowed values. In this regard, we reiterate the call made by [members of its faculty](#) earlier this year “for MIT to take a leadership role in defending freedom of speech and academic freedom, and . . . engage in constructive efforts to respond to those who are peacefully expressing moral distress in the face of an ethical and humanitarian crisis and in support for life.”

We therefore call on MIT to cease its targeting of Prahlad Iyengar, rescind all outstanding disciplinary sanctions, charges and proceedings against him, and end the university’s ban on *Written Revolution*’s distribution of the volume in which his article appeared. More broadly, we urge MIT to adhere to its own policies on freedom of expression and academic freedom, and refrain from [selectively and disproportionately](#) enforcing its rules against pro-Palestine activism and advocacy.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli U. Bali'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli  
MESA President  
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand'.

Laurie Brand  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California