

1 March, 2025

Aslı Ü. Bâli
Middle East Studies Association President
Professor, Yale Law School

Laurie A. Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom, Middle East Studies Association
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California

Dear Prof. Bâli, Prof. Brand, and colleagues,

We have read [the letter you posted on your website](#) dated February 10, 2025, addressed to the MIT President and Vice Provost for Faculty, and to representatives of the linguistics section of the MIT Department of Linguistics and Philosophy. The letter advocates for academic freedom and seeks to defend and advance it. We strongly share your concern for academic freedom, particularly in these challenging times. However, we believe that the only way to defend academic freedom is to evaluate situations where it is allegedly violated with utmost impartiality and clarity about the evidential basis for the claims made. Any other approach has, in our opinion, the potential to backfire and render us defenseless against genuine attacks on academic freedom, which are unfortunately becoming increasingly frequent.

In forming our opinion about the situation your letter is about, we have read in full [the correspondence](#) that Prof. Michel DeGraff (MDG, hereafter) made public, which is the sole primary source of information about the situation. We started reading from the bottom of the document (that is, from the initial emails), and we became convinced that the descriptions of the correspondence at the top (that is, the subsequent characterizations of the earliest emails) are full of misrepresentations – they should thus be completely ignored when deciding what happened, although they might be informative in other ways. We should also mention that we are setting aside reasonable concerns that the shared correspondence was cherry-picked. And even setting aside these concerns, we are convinced that there are no valid “reason[s] to believe that [the decision not to offer MDG’s course] reflect[...] political considerations [...].” As far as we can tell, we are instead dealing with a blatant disregard of professional, intellectual and academic standards and methods. We are therefore troubled by your letter and what appears to us to be a disregard for evidence.

You clearly indicate that you are basing your opinion on the reporting of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and hearsay (“Professor DeGraff maintains/contends” etc). This is wrong because, as we illustrate below, the primary source of information is available and paints a completely different picture. In this case, relying solely on the secondary sources is sloppy, propagates errors, and is something we should not tolerate, especially when serious issues like academic freedom are at stake.

1. You state that after MDG proposed the course under discussion, it was “suggest[ed] that the course (at that time titled “Use of Language and Linguistics in (De)colonization and Liberation Struggles”) might best be offered in another department.” According to the shared correspondence, this is not the case: what was said was merely that there “might be questions of fit, given the linguistics curriculum [...] that there are potential questions.” In light of this, MDG was asked to “send us a description of

goals and topics covered, as well as a syllabus (or at least some of the core readings)” (see Feb. 2 emails), with the “goal at [that] stage [being] simply to understand how the class fits within our curriculum and our mission statement” (see Feb. 5 emails). This seems not only reasonable to us, but, we venture, in line with the course approval procedures in all departments. Moreover, from the very outset, MDG’s departmental colleagues were clear that if, upon seeing the requested description of course goals and topics, the course seemed more appropriately suited as an interdepartmental offering, they would offer support in working with MDG to find an appropriate venue to offer the course: “To be clear, the question is not whether this is an appropriate class for MIT, but only whether the appropriate home is MIT Linguistics. And even if it turns out that this is not deemed appropriate, we would be happy to work with you ... to explore other possibilities” (see Feb. 1 email).

2. There was no response from MDG to this request, leaving the department in the dark about the content of the course. Instead of talking to his colleagues, MDG immediately started characterizing this reasonable request for information as censorship (see Feb. 2 emails). It should be obvious to anyone who has read the correspondence that there was nothing to censor at that point, as no information about the intellectual content of the course was made available to anyone. The department repeated its pleas to MDG to “engage with [the department] in conversation about the topic of [MDG’s] proposed class and on how it fits into our curriculum” (see Feb. 15 emails, etc).

3. We do not want to venture what conclusion should be drawn from the fact that, to quote you, “[MDG] maintains that he was unaware of a similar procedure having been deployed with regard to any other proposed departmental course.” But, as stated by a previous section head who was not involved in any other correspondence, the process of course approval was the same as always: “We meet to talk about next year’s classes and discuss what should be offered, often after small group discussion about the required classes in the undergraduate and graduate programs. Then, we usually meet as a whole faculty. Some colleagues can’t be in the meetings and share their plans/ideas via email. In the meeting or in email, questions can be raised.” The one difference in the case of MDG’s course was that the process “just took a different turn because there were questions and concerns this time and because you were unwilling to directly discuss them” (see Mar. 14 emails). Again, the procedure that was followed is reasonable, and in line with the procedures that we are aware of at other departments and other universities. MDG decided not to comply with it. During the protracted ordeal, dragged on by MDG, the shared correspondence serves as evidence of the department’s exceptionally high level of tolerance of his uncooperative behavior.

4. You state “Professor DeGraff contends that, in his first meeting with Professor Fox about the proposed course, Professor Fox called him an antisemite [...]” We cannot dispute whether MDG contended something or other about Prof. Fox, but this contention or its expected effects cannot be detected in the correspondence – if anything, there is evidence going in the opposite direction: for example, MDG thanks Prof. Fox and expresses agreement with him in some emails following the putative conversation, which would be unusual if Prof. Fox indeed called MDG an antisemite. The correspondence does evidence, however, a disagreement about whether a particular phrase involves an antisemitic trope, and not about whether someone is an antisemite. (According to the correspondence, the pertinent phrase can be found in MDG’s letter to President Magill of UPenn that he references.)

5. You cite a March 13 email by the Director of Undergraduate Studies to MDG that appeals to “climate” surrounding the Israel-Hamas war. The email in question is an instance of a colleague expressing concern and an encouragement to talk, which is what good colleagues do. Accordingly, we

do not understand what point you intended to support by citing this email. It is important to note that neither the climate nor its impact on the faculty and students seems to have factored into the decision about the course – it is clear from the correspondence that they were brought up merely as yet further impetus to have a conversation, which was needed on independent grounds, about the content of the course, which MDG resisted.

6. You bring up valuable initiatives of MDG’s pertaining to Haiti, which can only be lauded, as well as MDG’s 2021 course, which was proposed as “a seminar on the language-and-education foundations of the MIT-Haiti Initiative + its workings and objectives — as part of #BlackLivesMatter → #OurLanguagesMatter” (see Mar. 11 email, quoting an email from Feb. 4, 2021). Given the nature of this earlier course proposal, which pertained to topics on which there can be no doubt of MDG’s expertise, it should be unsurprising that the department had more potential questions about the later course on Israel/Palestine. (Prof. Grodzinsky’s [earlier letter](#) makes this point as well.)

7. You cite very positive and kind words of the department and its chair about MDG. It is perplexing to us that MDG, despite all this, has been so reluctant to cooperate with his departmental colleagues and so ready to publicly denounce them.

In conclusion, there is nothing in the evidence available to the public that suggests that MIT’s Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, or MIT itself, in any way curtailed anyone’s academic freedom. What it does suggest is that one member of the community disregarded departmental practices, dragged out a course assessment process by not communicating with his colleagues, and widely publicized internal communications without regard for his colleagues and students. Relying exclusively on MDG’s testimony and his interpretation of events, as you have done in your letter, is biased and misleading. In light of all this, we ask you to reconsider and withdraw your letter. Academic freedom is vitally important, and it is crucial to approach the subject with utmost seriousness and accuracy.

Finally, we should acknowledge that we are not impartial – we are professional colleagues of Prof. Michel DeGraff and the other MIT Linguistics faculty. We know the characters involved and have all sorts of opinions about them. Recognizing our potential bias, we have insisted on being as clear as we can be about what the evidence is regarding the current situation. We wish you had done the same.

Sincerely,

Luka Crnić
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Roni Katzir
Tel Aviv University

Elena Anagnostopoulou
University of Crete

Jon Nissenbaum
Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, CUNY

Rajesh Bhatt
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Yael Sharvit
University of California, Los Angeles

Yosef Grodzinsky
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Tue Trinh
University of Nova Gorica