

Some Notes on Recent Protests at MIT

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Abstract

Scientists Against Genocide et al. are struggling to get Institute administration (*the Institute*) to end their defense research relationship with MIT, although their moral arguments are far superior.

I argue this is because we as a community have historically fallen into a trap of **relying on divestment to locally address systemic problems**, and something we must course correct for soon.

Why Isn't Protest Working?

It's not the moral arguments! Protestors have historically relied on a well-accepted sentiment in their argumentation: **supporting immoral ends is also immoral**.

The Institute has historically relied on "academic freedom," an analogy to absolute freedom of speech. The issue is that **absolute freedom of speech misconstrues freedom of speech as a negative freedom instead of a positive freedom**. It's not that anyone gets to say whatever they want without punishment, it's that everyone gets to speak! The same applies to academic freedom: **is it moral for you to engage in research which prevents others from engaging in research?** I believe the answer is clearly "no."

A concerning pattern emerges when looking at recent large-scale protest campaigns on campus:

- something bad happens
- protestors recognize that the Institute is connected
- protestors organize, demanding that the Institute disassociate with the organizers of the event
- the Institute fully or partially rejects demands
- situation loses its moral urgency due to lack of progress
- "everyone" "moves on"

| | Vietnam War (1969-1973) | South African apartheid (1985-1991) | Saudi Arabia (2018-2019) | Israel-Hamas War (2023-24) |
|--------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Reason for protest | Participation in the U.S. industrial-military complex | Growing student concerns about the nation's racial caste system | Interference in the Yemeni civil war, murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi | Participation in the Israeli industrial-military complex |
| Institute involvement | hundreds of millions of dollars a year in Department of Defense research funding | Held \$336.9 million in South African assets in 1990 (converted to 2024 USD) | Acceptance of \$23 million of contracts for the Media Lab in 2019, other contracts and grants from various Saudi govt arms since the 90s | Acceptance of \$11 million in research funding from the IDF since 2015 |
| Protester demands | Significantly wind down/end national defense research at MIT | Divest from South African assets | End research and funding relationships with Saudi Arabian government | End research relationship with the Ministry of Defense |
| Notable forms of protest | "Scientists Strike for Peace" walkout in March 1969 gained international attention | Erection of shantytown on Kresge Oval in 1990 | Spring 2018 protest on Building 7 steps demanding crown prince Mohammed bin Salman have his invitation to campus revoked | Erection of encampment on Kresge Oval in spring 2024, a callback to apartheid protests |
| Institute response | Institute spun off Draper Laboratory into an independent non-profit. Still maintains its other defense lab Lincoln, strong academic relationship with Draper | No divestment | No Institute-wide divestment, pledged to help individual projects to divest | No divestment as of writing |
| Of note | Lincoln received around \$1.109 billion in total funding-most coming from the DoD-in fiscal year 2019 | Coalition Against Apartheid, the student group that led protest efforts, ceased its widespread protests in 1991, ultimately faded away until its 2023 revival | Defense of response makes use of an early version of academic freedom | [intentionally left blank] |

I believe an **overreliance on divestment** is at the heart of the issue. Divestment is not justice, but one of many steps necessary to getting justice. Protestors are attracted to divestment because **it seems easier to attack systemic issues locally**. However, many of the issues that make "large" systems like governments hard to address are also present in "small" systems like universities! Because protestors are **so focused on trying to bring about change in their local communities rather than coming together to address a root cause**, burnout is inevitable and students drop the issue, ultimately achieving nothing.

Divestment from morally bankrupt institutions is the morally right thing to do, but it is ineffective alone, and it seems that, at least on our campus, **demanding divestment first brings about the end of many a promising campaign**.

Conclusion

We as a community need to seriously address **what we want nonviolent protest to look like** at MIT and **engineer better social tools for demanding justice** from the Institute.

It is important that we as a community have **reliable ways of bringing about the justice we want to see**, because there will eventually be a situation of moral urgency that is of great importance to you. If we don't dig ourselves out of this current rut, I'm worried you'll ultimately flounder, just like the rest.

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