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Academics and activism: Stephen Hawking and the Israel boycott

Abstract

The news that famous physicist Stephen Hawking has decided to join the academic boycott of Israel has generated publicity and heated commentary. To better understand this controversy, it is useful to look at two contexts: boycotts as a form of nonviolent action, and academics as activists.

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The news that famous physicist Stephen Hawking has decided to join the academic boycott of Israel has generated publicity and heated commentary. To better understand this controversy, it is useful to look at two contexts: boycotts as a form of nonviolent action, and academics as activists.

Boycotts as nonviolent action

The academic boycott can be understood as one of the many methods of nonviolent action. Most media reports on the conflict in Israel-Palestine focus on either violence or diplomatic initiatives. Examples of violent engagement include Palestinian missiles and suicide bombers and Israeli shootings, bombings and military incursions. Examples of diplomatic initiatives include the Oslo accords and the involvement of foreign leaders in discussions and negotiations. However, behind the media emphasis on violence and diplomacy, much else is going on, including many assertive methods of struggle that do not involve physical violence.

Nonviolence is commonly associated with Mohandas Gandhi and the struggle for India's independence and with Martin Luther King, Jr and the US civil rights movement. Nonviolent action has also been used in numerous other campaigns, for example in toppling dictators in the Philippines in 1986, in Eastern Europe in 1989, in Serbia in 2000 and in Tunisia and Egypt in

2011.

The first Palestinian intifada, from 1987 to 1993, involved rallies, vigils, strikes, boycotts, an alternative education system and other methods of nonviolent action. The first intifada is perhaps better described as unarmed, because stone-throwing was used. A number of analysts have examined the role of nonviolent action in the Palestinian struggle, some of them arguing that exclusively using nonviolent methods would be more effective.[\[1\]](#)

In the struggle today, the use of violence overshadows the Palestinian nonviolent struggle, despite the large numbers of Israelis, Palestinians and outsiders using nonviolent methods in support of Palestinian goals.

Nonviolence scholar Gene Sharp documented 198 methods of nonviolent action, classifying them into three broad categories: protest and persuasion, such as petitions and rallies; noncooperation, including strikes and boycotts; and nonviolent intervention, such as fasts, sit-ins and parallel government.[\[2\]](#) Many of these methods have been used in the Israel-Palestine struggle, but few receive much media attention.

Many individuals and groups around the world have engaged in the Israel-Palestine struggle. For example, some have pushed for governments and corporations to end investments in Israel. One of the most famous international interventions was the Free Gaza flotilla of 2010.

The academic boycott of Israeli can best be understood as one of the many forms of nonviolent action being used in the struggle. Rather than the familiar boycotts of goods or corporations, such as boycott of Nestlé over its promotion of infant formula in the Third World, the academic boycott is a boycott of social and cultural links.

Boycotts are methods of noncooperation, but arguably the biggest impact of the academic boycott is the attention it brings to the struggle in Palestine. That a stand taken by Hawking on a social issue can generate news stories around the world, including both praise and condemnation, shows the potential symbolic power of an academic boycott.

Academics and activism

It might be asked, isn't Hawking stepping outside of his academic role by being "political"? Actually, Hawking's stand is just one of many ways academics engage with systems of power. Many academics are involved with social issues through teaching, research, public comment and personal involvement in campaigns. For example, social researchers investigate poverty, suicide, prison policies and a host of other significant issues, and some participate in public advocacy.

There is also plenty of research that doesn't seem overtly political but has significant social implications. Consider, for example, scientists who develop weapons such as land mines and computer scientists who install back doors in computer codes to enable surveillance. The question is not whether research is political, because all of it potentially is in a broad sense, but what social goals are being served.

It can be argued that academics are being political if they visit Israel and being political if they refuse to visit. The choice is not whether to engage with social issues, but exactly how to engage. Hawking is the focus of attention because he is a celebrity scientist who has made a stand. But he is just one of a huge number who engage with the issue of Israel-Palestine, on one side or another, in a variety of ways.

1. Souad R. Dajani, *Eyes Without Country: Searching for a Palestinian Strategy of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta, *Refusing to Be Enemies: Palestinian and Israeli Nonviolent Resistance to the Israeli Occupation* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2010); Mary Elizabeth King, *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance* (New York: Nation Books, 2007); Andrew Rigby, *Living the Intifada* (London: Zed Books, 1991).

2. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

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