

We should praise Hawking's boycott of Israeli meeting

Posted by Joan Russow
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by [Jonathan Rosenhead](#)

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Stephen Hawking's considered decision to support an academic boycott of Israeli institutions should not be derided, says a supporter of Palestinian universities

THEORETICAL physicist Stephen Hawking must be the most recognised contemporary scientist in the world. Many millions of people know what he looks and sounds like. And until last month he commanded universal respect for his intellectual achievements and strength of character against extraordinary odds.

However in recent weeks some media columnists have been writing "Stephen Hawking, the greatest scientist in the world...", and then going on to say how distressed, disappointed or disgusted they are with him.

What was his crime? He withdrew from this month's Israeli Presidential Conference. He did this in support of a Palestinian call to boycott Israeli universities, and events closely tied to the Israeli state, because of the country's treatment of the Palestinians.

Did we have Hawking wrong all this time? Or is it the boycott that should be reappraised?

Some Israelis have been busy reappraising him since his decision. [Steven Plaut](#) of the University of Haifa suggested giving him a free ticket on the Achille Lauro (older readers might recall the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship in 1985 by Palestine Liberation Front members, who

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shot dead a wheelchair-bound Jewish passenger). Web commentators have been portraying Hawking as a mentally enfeebled man, suborned by bullying pro-Palestine activists.

More moderate voices have limited themselves to suggesting that he should boycott his voice production system because it relies on a chip designed in Israel. There are many reasons to argue that it doesn't. It seems hard to have a grown-up conversation about the subject.

The background to Hawking's decision – which was both serious and measured – is this: he initially accepted the invitation to Israeli President Shimon Peres's conference because, as he has now said, it would "allow me to express my opinion on the prospects for a peace settlement" between Israel and the Palestinians.

Various groups and individuals wrote asking him to reconsider his participation. I was co-organiser of one such letter signed by 20 UK professorial scientists in 14 disciplines from 12 universities, joined by MIT philosopher Noam Chomsky. Hawking let us know that he wished to consult senior academics at Palestinian universities, which he did. In [his withdrawal letter to Peres](#) (obtained by British newspaper *The Guardian*) he said that they were "unanimous that I should respect the boycott". He also said that "had I attended, I would have stated my opinion that the policy of the present Israeli government is likely to lead to disaster".

If boycott is such an outrageous idea, how can it be that a man of Hawking's calibre, making up his mind after due deliberation, could decide that in the circumstances it was the least bad option?

It was in 2004 that leading Palestinian academic and civil society organisations called for an academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions. To be clear, I can do joint work with an Israeli professor without breaking the boycott – but I would not engage in any of the many academic activities that potentially involve institutional contacts. Nor would I have dealings with entities closely associated with the Israeli state. No Israeli researcher is prevented from taking part in normal academic exchange. But there is a sharp message: that for Israel to continue on its current course has consequences.

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It has been argued that there is no reason to target universities for the misdemeanours of the Israeli state. But after nearly 50 years, there is no part of Israeli society that is not implicated in the military occupation of Palestinian territories. For example, many universities are built on lands quasi-legally seized from Palestinians, most carry out research for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) – Tel Aviv University recently boasted of 55 such contracts – and most universities have special courses or arrangements for IDF members.

History has many successful examples of boycott – for example the Montgomery bus boycott in reaction to racial segregation in Alabama, and the multifaceted boycott of apartheid South Africa. It is a method used by the many against the powerful few. If governments in the UK and other European countries and especially the US would take steps to exert pressure on the Israeli government over its outrageous treatment of the Palestinians, there would be no need for boycott.

An international BBC poll of 26,000 people across the world on how they view 16 different countries was published last month. [Only North Korea, Pakistan and Iran are viewed less positively than Israel](#). Boycott is a tactic which populations can use when governments refuse to act.

Academic boycott is only one part of a worldwide campaign including divestment and sanctions asked for by Palestinian civil society. It stretches from consumer goods such as fruit and vegetables and cosmetics to touring Israeli cultural troupes supported by their Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is a burgeoning sports boycott, which most recently campaigned against the decision of European football's governing body UEFA to stage its Under 21 tournament in Israel. UEFA's annual congress, in London last month, was the scene of vociferous protests.

In the case of South Africa, it was the sports boycott which captured the world's attention. But Israel's distinctively different culture makes academic boycott particularly effective, and the Israeli government has shown itself highly sensitive to it. Proof, if needed, was that demonstrators outside UEFA were clearly making the connection with Hawking. Their words say it all: "We urge UEFA to follow the brave example of world-renowned scientist Stephen Hawking."

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