

Dilemma: what it is (and isn't)

In 2009, the people of Iran went on their rooftops to shout 'Allah Akbar' (God is great) as a protest against the regime. In response, the government had two choices, neither very attractive: let the protest continue unhindered (and possibly grow), or arrest people and try to justify forbidding people shouting that 'God is Great', something commonly done by devout Muslims. This protest is an example of a dilemma action.

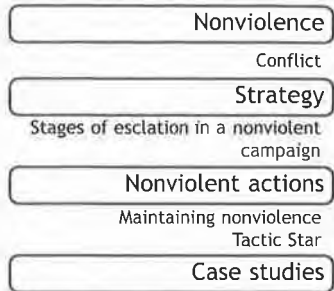
A dilemma action leaves the opponent with no obvious 'best response' – each possible choice has significant negative aspects. Even the opponent's most attractive response will have a mix of advantages and disadvantages that are not directly comparable, as assessed at the time or in hindsight. Many nonviolent actions are reactions to what authorities or multinational companies do: activists respond to agendas set by others. In a dilemma action, activists are proactive.

Most nonviolent actions do not impose a dilemma. Take a conventional expression of social concern, such as an antiwar rally on Hiroshima Day in a liberal democracy; authorities may tolerate or even facilitate the event because it poses little threat to vested interests, whereas banning it would only arouse unnecessary antagonism. Some forms of civil disobedience, such as ploughshares actions involving damaging military equipment, also pose no dilemma, because authorities know exactly what to do: arrest the activists, who willingly surrender to police. Nevertheless, we think it is more useful to think of dilemma actions as a matter of degree rather than present or absent. Dilemma actions provide one approach for increasing the effectiveness of non-violent action strategies. Knowing more about the dynamics of dilemma actions can enable activists to design their actions to pose difficult dilemmas to opponents, leading opponents to make unpopular decisions, or waste their efforts preparing for several possible responses.

Creating a dilemma

In addition to the core feature of a dilemma action, five factors can frequently be found in actual dilemma actions that add to the difficulty of opponents making choices:

1. The action has a constructive, positive element, such as delivering humanitarian aid, or expressing religious commitment, as in Iran in 2009.
2. Activists use surprise or unpredictability, for instance by inventing a new method, or turning up in a totally unexpected place.



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Nonviolent actions

3. Opponents' prime choices are in different domains (political, social, personal), which means that the choices are difficult to compare. For example, when a police officer has to choose whether or not to arrest a friend at a demonstration, there is a conflict between the economic (keep the job), and interpersonal (keep the friend) domains.
4. Dilemma actions can be timed to appeal to mass media coverage.
5. A dilemma action can appeal to widely held beliefs within society. The apparent religious commitment among the rooftop protesters in Iran is a good example.

These factors contribute to making the dilemma more difficult to “solve”, but are not essential in constructing it. Governments and their agents – such as police and prison officials – are often those who are forced to deal with dilemmas. However, this is not a core feature of a dilemma action, since it can be directed towards private companies, for example banks or corporations.

The opponent's response

Usually the best option for the opponents is to stop the action without anybody noticing – the activists' strategy should then be to make it as public as possible. Something that makes a dilemma difficult is when the opponent has to compare consequences from different domains; it can be difficult to compare the benefit of an approving reaction from supporters, with negative feedback from a different audience. In the Freedom Flotilla case study, Israeli authorities were faced with both domestic and international audiences. They chose to prioritise the domestic image, where they were perceived as upholding a blockade that would protect Israel from a terrorist attack. It was difficult to compare the benefits of upholding this domestic image with the negative effects of the outrage generated when international audiences perceived the military response as an unprovoked assault on humanitarian aid workers in international waters.

For activists, dilemma actions can seem attractive because they offer the prospect of success no matter what the opponent does. However, creating dilemmas for the opponent is not necessary for nonviolent actions to be successful and like all other strategies it should be used with care.

This text is adapted from Majken Jul Sørensen and Brian Martin. 'The Dilemma Action: Analysis of an Activist Technique.' Peace & Change, Vol. 39, no. 1 (2014): pages 73-100.

Further reading:

☞ *The Dilemma Demonstration: Using Nonviolent Civil Disobedience to Put the Government between a Rock and a Hard Place*, Philippe Duhamel (Minneapolis, MN: Center for Victims of Torture, 2004).



Freedom Flotilla to Gaza – a dilemma action case study

Majken Jul Sørensen and Brian Martin

In 2010, a convoy of six ships – the Freedom Flotilla – set out to challenge the Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip, posing a dilemma for the offending Israeli government. On board the ships were around 700 unarmed civilians from around the world, including some well known personalities, like the Swedish crime novelist Henning Mankell, and parliamentarians from a number of countries. In addition to the passengers and representatives from the media, the ships also carried 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid, such as building materials and medical equipment like X-ray machines and ultrasound scanners. The long journey meant that the pressure built as the ships approached Gaza, making this a drama for the world to watch.

The Israeli government had two main options. The first was to let the ships arrive in Gaza with their passengers and cargo, which in the eyes of many Israeli citizens would mean giving in to pressure. The other option was to stop the vessels. Neither of these options was desirable for the Israeli government, which would have preferred that everything remained quiet about Gaza. Dilemma actions are a type of action in which opponents have to make a choice between two or more responses, each of which has significant negative aspects; the responses are not readily comparable, which is the nub of the dilemma. When the Israeli authorities decided to stop the flotilla their next dilemma arose: what means should be used, and when?

The Israeli government's response

Commando soldiers from the Israeli Defense Force attacked early in the morning on 31 May, while the ships were still in international waters. On board the Mavi Marmara, nine Turkish citizens were killed, some of them shot dead at close range. The killings created an enormous public relations disaster for the Israeli government, and were condemned around the world: the use of force backfired on the Israeli government despite its efforts to inhibit public outrage.

Many governments summoned the Israeli ambassadors or recalled their own. The relationship with the Turkish government, for decades one of the Israeli government's few allies in the Middle East, was damaged for more than a year. Although the Obama administration in the United States was very restrained in its reactions, it expressed criticism of the Israeli government. A UN commission was established to investigate the attacks, and in August 2011 reached the controversial conclusion that the blockade of Gaza was not illegal, but that the use of force had been excessive and unreasonable.

The Freedom Flotilla was not the first attempt to break the blockade of Gaza. On New Year's Eve 2009, 1300 activists from 43 different countries tried to break the blockade by marching into Gaza. This initiative was just as international as the flotilla, and was stopped by Israeli authorities. Since 2008, the

Free Gaza Movement has sent several passenger boats to Gaza, some of which arrived successfully. However, both of these initiatives could only carry a small amount of humanitarian aid, making it less threatening than the Freedom Flotilla – these actions did not impose a dilemma.

Increasing the dilemma

Within the Freedom Flotilla movement there was discussion about how to make the dilemma for the Israeli authorities even more difficult. The following year, 2011, the campaign planned to repeat the journey, and 12 ships were ready to travel towards Gaza, 10 of them from Greek waters. More ships, with passengers from even more countries, were chosen as a means for raising the pressure.

However, the Israeli government avoided a repeat of the 2010 scenario by using more subtle ways of stopping the ships. They cultivated relationships with the Greek government, and launched a successful diplomatic offensive that resulted in UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon calling on all governments to urge their citizens not to participate in a second flotilla. The Greek authorities banned the ships from leaving their ports; those that attempted to leave anyway were intercepted by the Greek coast guard. Two of the ships had similar propeller damage, leading to suspicion that they had been sabotaged by the Israeli secret service. The Turkish authorities also prevented the Mavi Marama from leaving Turkey – in spite of the Turkish government's criticism of the blockade of Gaza. Only one ship, leaving from France, was boarded by Israeli commando soldiers. These events prevented a potential public relations disaster for the Israeli government. The Israeli authorities managed to keep the issue in the arena of permissions to leave ports, thus preventing the activists from reaching their preferred arena, international waters. Bureaucratic obstacles are less newsworthy than a military attack in international waters.

The activists had prepared for many different Israeli government reactions, but had not foreseen the possibility of bureaucratic obstacles of this kind. One way to surmount such obstacles would have been for the ships to start from different ports in different countries. However, this would have increased the organisational challenge of arriving in Gaza at the same time. It could have been a way of establishing the dilemma over a longer period of time, thereby increasing the pressure; however, it might have been easier to stop them separately using force, without the media drama of the first journey.

In the section about strategy you can read more about dilemma actions. Although not all dilemma actions involve a constructive element like bringing humanitarian aid, this is one way to make the dilemma more complicated for the opponent. Similarly, surprises and unpredictability can increase pressure. The Freedom Flotilla lost a lot of momentum in 2011 when it was not a surprise as it had been the year before, and the Israeli authorities had learned from their mistakes.

Activists seldom can be certain that their actions will have the intended effect. The Freedom Flotilla did not succeed in breaking the blockade of Gaza. But the fact that the Israeli government worked so hard to defuse a potential repetition of the 2010 experience provides evidence that it had been an effective action.

Further reading:

■ This text is adapted from Majken Jul Sørensen and Brian Martin. 'Dilemma actions: analysis of an activist technique.' *Peace & Change*, Vol. 39, no. 1 (2014): pages 73-100.

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Israel: New Profile learns from the experience of others

Ruth Hiller

There was a new political awareness in Israel in the mid-1990s. Increasing numbers of Israelis were objecting to Israel's presence in Lebanon and the loss of Israeli lives. Some were questioning the government's infringement into Palestinian lands. Demonstrations were taking place daily, particularly at major intersections, to pressure Israel to get out of Lebanon. There were several groups who were leading the grassroots movements at the time? Four Mothers, Mothers and Women for Peace, and Women in Black.

Personally, my son had decided to refuse conscription into the military, and I needed to get more involved. I started to look for people who were examining things critically, hoping to find a support group. I had a neighbour who was a social activist and we started going to demonstrations at the intersection close to home. There I heard a woman address the crowd about getting even more involved. The next day I called her and she told me about a study group that had just started meeting on a monthly basis. The group was comprised of middle and upper middle class white women (of European descent as opposed to Mizrahi, Ethiopian or Palestinian origin), most like myself, looking for some way to bring about change together; some were already active in the peace movement, some had lost family members in war.

In the study group I learned how to look at things with a critical, feminist eye. Relä Mazali, a feminist, author and activist in the peace and human rights movements for many years, was the facilitator. She brought materials which we analysed to understand why things are the way they are. We questioned: why is Israel a militarist power? why is there so much discrimination in Israel? what are the similarities between the pyramid of power in the military and civilian life in Israel? what is victimisation? what are the roles of the women and mothers? what is Jewish heritage and what role does it play in Israel today?

We talked about effective movements that we could learn from. We looked

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