

Solidarity Beyond City Halls: A Study of City Transnational Activism on Palestine Question

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ABSTRACT

Global communities have been responding to the decades of Palestine-Israel conflict through, for example, transnational activism in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Cities are now becoming increasingly important in global politics, and they are hardly ignoring international issues, including the imbalanced conflict between two political entities. Despite this, city transnational activism on the Palestine question remains limited in the scholarly realm. This research aimed to investigate transnational activism carried out by several European cities, such as Barcelona (Spain), Oslo (Norway), Liège, and Verviers (Belgium), amidst strong political and military support for Israel from Western countries. The research applied the qualitative method and the concept of city transnational activism. The findings suggest that the selected cities practiced transnational activism in the form of moral calls as well as boycott resolutions to emphasize the necessity to respect Palestinian rights and oppose Israel's policy towards Palestine and the violation of international law. This paper provides a perspective that local state actors, like cities, through activism, can champion global norms through local actions in response to global issues like conflicts.

Keywords: Palestine; solidarity; city transnational activism; conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

The Palestine-Israel conflict, having taken place for over 75 years, particularly since the mass migration of Jewish people to Palestine following a unilateral declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, is a global issue attracting the attention of international communities. Jewish citizens of Israel have enjoyed all kinds of rights just like those in many sovereign countries. On the other hand, a very different situation happens to Palestine, whose people and authorities heavily rely on international aid. While the State of Israel is now a full member of the United Nations, Palestine is still a non-member observer state of the global organization.

Following the United Nations's partition plan, Palestine has suffered from territorial loss since the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six-Day War and the modern practice of illegal settlement in the occupied territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. A report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights notes that over 700,000 Israeli settlers have been living illegally in the West Bank alone, and another 229,000 Israeli settlers in East Jerusalem (United Nations, 2023).



Picture 1. Palestinian Loss of Land Over Time.
Source: UCCPIN (n.d.)

The Israeli authorities impose racial discrimination similar to the apartheid system on the Palestinians by building walls and establishing a system of permits and military checkpoints to restrict the travel of Palestinians and their goods to and from the occupied territories. Limited access to resources by the Israeli authorities creates a systemic dependency of the Palestinians on the State of Israel. In addition, demolitions of properties and oppression by either the Israeli illegal settlers or security forces on the Palestinians in the territories continue amidst international criticism. Amnesty International calls Israel's apartheid a "cruel system of domination" and a "crime against humanity" (Amnesty International, 2022).

Gaza Strip, another Palestinian territory that is home to several of the strongest resistance groups against Israel's occupation, is experiencing a total blockade (on land, sea, and air). Israel's military has conducted a series of indiscriminate bombardments – consistently claimed as a right to self-defense – on the enclave to put pressure on the resistance groups. Consequently, most of the casualties were public

facilities, civilian buildings, and the people of Gaza instead of the military personnel of resistance movements. For example, in response to the HAMAS' Oct. 7th insurgency, Israel dropped tons of huge explosives onto the Gaza Strip, causing, as of this writing, at least 20,424 people killed and over 54,036 people injured, most of whom were women and children (Aljazeera, 2023b) as well as the destruction of over 60 percent of residential houses, in addition to schools, refugee camps, hospitals, and more (Anadolu Agency, 2023a).

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) warned that Israel was "seeking to permanently alter the composition of Gaza's population" through a military campaign forcing mass internal displacement of 1.9 million people (or 85 percent of the population) inside the enclave (OHCHR, 2023). Considered the biggest Israeli military assault since 1948, the international community criticized the imbalanced operation and demanded a permanent ceasefire. The conflict also recalled a two-state solution in which Israel and Palestine would co-exist with equal rights and legitimate boundaries.

Despite strong support from prominent national leaders of Western countries for the State of Israel, legitimizing the recent military campaign in the Gaza Strip, global support for the Palestinian cause was increasing. There was a shifting of global public opinion challenging Israel's narratives, thanks to social media used by pro-Palestinian activists for counter-narratives (Suleiman, 2023). The countless casualties and mass displacement of people, even bigger than that in the 1948 Nakba (Catastrophe, mass displacement), brought about a belief in Israel's genocidal acts toward Palestinians for territorial expansion instead of self-defense.

Solidarity for the Palestinian suffering for decades has been expressed by a wide range of global communities through various activities of activism, among which are cities. Cities did not use to be factors affecting transnational actions, and scholars hardly believed that cities within state sovereignty would have space to build transnational cooperation and voice their position regarding world politics in times of pre-globalization era. It, however, now deserves looking at the phenomenon of city transnational activism for two reasons; first, the voices and positions of cities are often different from or more radical than their central authorities; second, transnational activism by cities raises a question about how they can give support to certain groups of society. In addition, most literature does not recognize cities with their municipal governments as meaningful actors in transnational activism.

The world's big cities were becoming the main epicenters for multiple waves of demonstrations against Israel's repeated brutal bombardments across continents, such as London, Ottawa, Cape Town, Jakarta, Wellington, Brasilia, and more. The recent Israeli repercussions on the Gaza Strip, triggering protests in which activists were chanting "free Palestine," "end genocide," and "ceasefire now," could be the biggest mobilization of pro-Palestine protests in history. Although the pro-Palestinian demonstrations often did not represent the countries' official policy, where the activists gathered (Luerdi, 2014), a few cases showed politicians and parts of municipal governments took part in the events (Almayadeen, 2021; Aodha, 2023). Just like civil society groups, municipal governments were involved in advocacy of the Palestinian cause even before the recent war in the Gaza Strip. The local state authorities' engagement in activism made cities critical to Israel's policy not only to the Palestinian population in Gaza but also in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Europe is the region from which Israel receives traditional support in terms of politics and military. However, the region also hosts a few cities that have strong voices to oppose Israel's policy towards the Palestinians through transnational activism. Such activism was meant to put pressure on Israel through local

actions so that the Israeli authorities were politically willing to change their behavior toward Palestine and respect the Palestinian basic rights and even the right to self-determination. This paper aims to examine transnational activism practiced by several European cities, such as Spain's Barcelona, Norway's Oslo, and Belgium's Liège and Verviers. They could be the most radical among their European counterparts in expressing their solidarity on the Palestine question, especially during Israel's military campaign in the Gaza Strip following Hamas' Oct. 7th insurgency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There exists literature discussing transnational activism regarding the Palestine question, referring to the pro-Palestinian movements or advocacy as a political expression of cross-border solidarity against the occupation practiced by the Israeli regime and day-to-day injustice towards the Palestinians in the occupied territories. The literature provides an analysis of a variety of actors in transnational activism, most of which are consolidated in social and intellectual movements. The literature shows that the Palestine question has become a concern among not only the Palestinian diaspora but also activists and nations worldwide.

Transnational activism in the form of social movements on the Palestine question has been studied by scholars, among which the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) global movement is the most discussed actor (Ananth, 2013; Awad, 2021; Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009; Morrison, 2022). The Palestinian struggle against Israeli oppression now includes the BDS movement as a major element (Ananth, 2013), and their activism has been a challenge to the hegemonic Western ideology of Zionism (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009). Not only has the BDS movement been considered an effective strategy of resistance and cross-border solidarity (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009), but they have also advanced the issue of Palestine into a broader progressive framework of "global justice" thanks to the frames and tactical repertoires (Morrison, 2022). However, Awad (2021) suggests the shifting of the BDS movement model from solidarity to co-struggling with Palestinians (including their authorities) in the quest for justice and liberation.

Studies on the intersection between pro-Palestinian activists and other movements have been conducted by scholars (Erakat & Hill, 2019; Salih et al., 2017). The intersection has led to the formation of the Black-Palestinian Transnational Solidarity (Erakat & Hill, 2019) and the coalition of the Palestinian Youth Movement with multiple social movements (Salih et al., 2017). Erakat and Hill (2019) noted that the domestic event (racial oppression of the Black community in the US) fostered the formation of the new movement. Meanwhile, Salih et al., (2017) argued that global/transnational and local connections between the various movements brought the youth movement into the alliance. Both studies suggest similar experiences of the social movements, such as oppression, injustice, or racial surveillance, as the main drivers of the formation of alliances.

Davis (2020) and Lindholm (2021) studied transnational activism by the Palestinian diaspora and movement in specific countries like Sweden and Australia. Activism by the Swedish Palestinians is a way to bridge identity engagement with the Palestinian cause, whether promoting activism is a responsibility or pressure, emboldened by the conflict experience (Lindholm, 2021). On the other hand, the pro-Palestinian movement in Australia encounters challenges amidst support from politicians and media in favor of Israel. Davis (2020) suggests that transnational activism by Australian pro-Palestinian activists needs a "cult of leadership" to increase the movement's visibility and influence alike.

Apart from being in the form of a social movement, transnational activism on the Palestine question in the form of an intellectual movement has been a long tradition among intellectual activists. The Arab-

American intellectual movement through the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) has been assessed by Khan (2018). The AAUG contributed to creating a transnational intellectual generation (Khan, 2018). Similar to previous studies (Erakat & Hill, 2019; Salih et al., 2017), such academic activism was capable of attracting diverse allies from the “global” Third World, grappling with racism, imperialism, and colonialism (Khan, 2018).

A new type of activism, called online activism, discussing the Palestinian resistance, was studied by Monshipouri and Prompichai (2018). Social media provides opportunities for transnational activists to call for solidarity (Monshipouri & Prompichai, 2018). Unlike the previous studies, Cooper and Herman (2020) analyzed local state activism, placing several British cities as objects of the study. The study attempts to figure out progressive municipal governments’ participation in transnational activism amidst criticism. The local or domestic structures of governance have not barred them from showing solidarity by, for example, demanding “boycotting Israel” as do pro-Palestinian social movements (Cooper & Herman, 2020).

The literature suggests that the discussion on transnational activism regarding the Palestine question is dominated by non-state actors, in which civil society plays its role in a durable, coordinated, and organized way. On the other hand, very little attention does transnational activism by cities gain within scholarship, although cities in some parts of the world have shown their solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Amidst literature scarcity, Cooper and Herman's study (2020) can best describe the phenomenon and contribute to providing the main concept in this paper.

This paper attempts to narrow the gap and provides a perspective on the newly transnational activism practiced by cities involving municipal governments. This paper contributes to enriching the concept of city transnational activism in the study of international relations (of cities), particularly by suggesting transnational activism as an important theme in the field. In addition, this paper will benefit scholars who have an interest in studying the behavior of local state and/or non-state actors, especially when responding to global issues.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Activism is more frequently associated with opposition to state policy, as the main actors of activism are originally groups of civil society (Cooper & Herman, 2020). Activism is the response to a range of issues within various scales, from the local to the international sphere, that attract the attention of civilians due to their potential to harm public goods or against certain values. Activism, which is linked to grassroots social movements and campaigning, is characterized as an expression of effort and persuasion that uses speech and other tools to influence state authorities and other entities to alter their policies and practices (Cooper & Herman, 2020). Protest, petition, community organizing, and engagement with local and international policies are some activities of activism.

Thanks to globalization and technological development, for instance, ICT and transportation, an issue that occurs in a certain region far away reaches the communities, including state authorities in other regions, almost without obstacles. Consequently, the activities of activism are now transnational relations, when the interaction involves at least a type of non-state actor or other than central state authorities. Soetjipto and Yuliestiana (2020) note the debates and consensus in the literature on transnational relations and activism in international relations. The literature study provides information on the various actors of transnational activism categorized as transnational civil society. Transnational activism now challenges “sovereignty,” which is the fundamental characteristic of the modern state system (Erdem, 2015).

Despite the origin of activism emphasizing the political actions of civil society, transnational activism is now practiced by a wider spectrum of actors other than the entities of civil society, such as parts of state authorities, foundations and funders, and media, all of which are recognized as transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 2014; Tarrow, 2001). Advocacy and a well-defined political agenda are usually highlighted in social justice activism, even when it comes from local state authorities (Cooper & Herman, 2020). Furthermore, Leffel (2018) suggests the local authorities' involvement in similar initiatives as the "municipal foreign policy movement," to be a new model of city diplomacy.

Since the role of cities is becoming more important in line with the rising variety of global issues, cities have been advocating for such global challenges or emergencies as health, climate, or humanitarian crises. In other words, cities now engage in activism, which is in line with what Roth (2019) argues: "Municipalities have a great responsibility to confront global problems." However, some critics may label this kind of activism involving municipal governments as "overreaching" and "acting improperly," especially when it comes to being in situations of conflict, like when responding to an international conflict (Cooper & Herman, 2020).

Even though the concept of "city activism" or "city transnational activism" is not yet familiar among scholars of international relations – perhaps not well developed yet – it is common sense that both cannot be separated from the international relations of cities (also called para-diplomacy, transnational municipalism, etc.). This paper suggests that while the term "city" indicates the size of an area as well as an actor, the term "transnational" refers to a situation in which a certain borderless issue penetrates a city whose communities or municipal governments are aware of.

Taking account of the pluralism approach, the actorness of the city, along with its activism, is not merely constituted by the municipal governments but also by other local entities, such as activists, business people, media, and more. Differently, Cooper and Herman (2020) suggest the distinction between state activism (including local state activism, e.g., city activism by municipal governments) from non-state activism. The latter demands that others take action because it often implicitly implies that activist bodies alone are unable to bring about the changes they desire (Cooper & Herman, 2020). On the other hand, city activism is frequently the outcome of political pressure from groups involved in social movements (Cooper & Herman, 2020). In this sense, hardly does activism by the municipal governments take place independently of social groups. Tarrow (2001) even suggests that transnational social movements and other international institution agents can interact with and assist in leveraging poor-resource domestic actors within their society.

City activism may utilize state power and resources (Cooper & Herman, 2020). The action is to advance demands like social justice even though the superordinate (central state bodies) may express disagreement – and it is boldening when they fail to address the ongoing issue or accommodate the voice of people – through which a city council can adopt a resolution, for instance; boycott (suspension, exclusion), sanction, and more as a form of solidarity to the certain group of people often perceived as the oppressed or the weak. Such legislative power is a novel advantage municipal governments possess that is not owned by social movements (Leffel, 2018).

City activism is paved by the norm of "responsibility" and "democracy embeddedness" (Cooper & Herman, 2020). Taking responsibility is politically volunteered since responsibility is a key component of city activism, which highlights the ability and willingness of municipal governments to address an issue (e.g., international conflict) and turn doing so into a communal, self-imposed duty (Cooper & Herman, 2020). Responsibility and care indicate that municipal governments are exposed to diffused global values

(e.g., human rights, international law, etc.). Hence, local states like cities are where local-level codification of global norms takes place (Leffel, 2018).

Meanwhile, the other norm frequently refers to “democratizing local governments,” providing political opportunity in which civil society participates in the local decision-making process through legitimate democratic channels. In this case, municipal governments are politically aligned with social movements in activism, in which central authorities neglect to enforce or violate certain values (Leffel, 2018). However, in the case studied by Cooper and Herman (2020), municipal governments embedded activism within non-state networks by, for example, participating in the solidarity movement.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study used a qualitative research design to explore and compare city transnational activism practices, focusing specifically on responses to the Israel–Palestine conflict from October 2023 to January 2024. A qualitative method was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, narratives, and contextual dynamics that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research was conducted as library research, primarily relying on secondary data from scholarly journals, academic books, and credible online sources relevant to the topic. These sources were systematically reviewed and critically analyzed to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in how selected cities articulate and implement transnational activism. By employing this approach, the study underscores the role of municipal governments in addressing the conflict, situating their practices within broader discussions of international relations and global civil society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the city activism concept, this paper suggests that municipal governments are the main actors of transnational activism in the case study without passing over the role of civil society groups or social movements. The cities assessed portray awareness of violence and deep-rooted conflict between Palestine and Israel despite being geographically distant. The cities raised solidarity for the Palestinians – perceived as the oppressed people – in the imbalanced conflict, struggling for their basic rights and statehood against one of the world’s strongest countries with the most sophisticated military equipment.

The cities advocated the Palestinian cause through activism practiced in various forms, starting from moral calls to more materialized actions like boycott resolutions (e.g., suspension and exclusion). Transnational activism by the cities was conducted to put pressure on Israel to respect Palestinian rights and change its policy toward Palestine, in addition to championing certain values, such as human rights, international law, and non-violent conflict resolution. The values, especially human rights, were known to be strongly attached to the tradition of transnational activism in the case of Europe. The cities were involved in activism when their central authorities were seen not to have done enough when it came to Israel’s violations of such values.

1) Barcelona (Spain)

Located in the special autonomous region of Catalonia in Spain, the city of Barcelona has an important position in Spanish politics. Barcelona is home to influential leftist political parties favoring “localism” and “regionalism,” and the coalition of the left wings has predominantly dominated local politics

and ruled the city since the end of Franco's dictatorship (Blanco et al., 2020). In addition, it is also home to progressive tradition and strong urban social movements (Blanco et al., 2020). Historically rooted in struggling for identity and self-governance, Barcelona has a long tradition of defending human rights and championing social justice. Thanks to a certain degree of autonomy, Barcelona is capable of playing a role beyond national boundaries. The city's international relations are conducted to strengthen the regional identity (Zamorano & Morató, 2015) and promote international cooperation for development and solidarity (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2023a).

Spain officially has had diplomatic relations with the State of Israel since 1986. However, as of this writing, it doesn't recognize Palestine as an independent country. Despite this fact, Barcelona signed an agreement of friendship and collaboration with Israel's capital of Tel Aviv and Gaza City in 1998, following the Declaration of Barcelona (also known as the Barcelona Process) and the Oslo Accords as a participation to promote peace between both sides (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2023b). The effort to promote peace in the region through the triangular twinning relationship between the three cities has not worked significantly due to the conflict, but Barcelona keeps on the bilateral ties with the two cities separately. While Barcelona's relationship with Gaza City has not developed, its relationship with Tel Aviv has transformed into meaningful sister-city cooperation in various fields since then.

A radical change took place following the local election in 2015, paving the way for Barcelona en Comú's then-activist Ada Colau, leading her to secure the position of the Mayor of Barcelona and bringing the city's transnational activism on the Palestine question into the spotlight. The new municipal government of Barcelona turned out to be more critical of the Israeli far-right authorities. In February 2023, the city temporarily suspended its institutional relationship with Israel, including its 25-year twinning city cooperation with Tel Aviv, over its policy towards Palestine. In her letter to the Israeli Prime Minister, she wrote:

"I have decided to temporarily suspend relations with the State of Israel and with the official institutions of that state – including the twinning agreements with Tel Aviv – until the Israeli authorities put an end to the system of violations of the Palestinian people and fully comply with the obligations imposed on them by international law and the various United Nations resolutions. We cannot be silent" (Keeley, 2023).

In addition to branding Israel as an apartheid state, Mayor Colau also argued that Barcelona – known as a Mediterranean city and defender of human rights – would neither apply a double-standard policy nor ignore a breach that was extensively confirmed and recorded by international organizations (Federman, 2023). Despite "anti-Semitism" accusations from the Zionist lobby in the city and criticism from the Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares, calling the resolution a "unilateral move" (Spain in English, 2023), the Barcelona municipal government's decision was applauded by anti-Zionist Jewish groups from 15 countries (BDS National Committee, 2023a) in addition to local social movements and prominent figures, such as Nobel laureates, actors, and musicians (Spain in English, 2023).

Such a policy was taken following the demand of a federation of 100 Catalan NGOs incorporated in "lafede.cat" and over 4,000 residents to end the twinning relation with Tel Aviv as a response to Israel's devastating assault on Gaza in 2021 that caused over 200 Palestinians killed (Catalan News, 2021, 2023a). In their manifesto, the federation called the Israeli airstrikes an "ethnic cleansing" of the Palestinians and condemned Israel's crime of apartheid and systematic persecution of the Palestinians in the occupied territories (Catalan News, 2021). Further, the federation called for increased measures to de-escalate the

situation, safeguard human rights, and put an end to the occupation, together with communication with civil society organizations (Catalan News, 2021).

The twinning relationship between Barcelona and Tel Aviv, including the wider institutional relationship with Israel, was restored in September 2023 following a new Mayor-elect, the Socialist Party's Jaume Collboni. Unlike the previous regime, the new leftist leadership under Collboni showed a moderate stance in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Collboni's administration argued that the city of Barcelona should be a bridge and be in dialogue with other world cities, while still maintaining an unequivocal commitment to Palestine (Catalan News, 2023b). The city's new municipal government even announced to have Palestine as its first trip plan outside Europe as a commitment to the Palestine cause (Catalan News, 2023b).



Picture 2. A Pro-Palestine Protest in Barcelona on November 11, 2023.
Source: Catalan News (2023c)

The recent harsh armed conflict between HAMAS and Israel in the Gaza Strip again redirected Barcelona's foreign policy. In November 2023, the Barcelona City Council passed a resolution to cut institutional ties with Israel's authorities until they agree on a permanent ceasefire (Catalan News, 2023d). The city condemned the HAMAS' Oct. 7th attack, but Israel's reaction to devastating the tiny enclave by bombing vital public facilities and targeting innocent civilians was unjustified and unacceptable. The city's policy was in line with the Spanish left-wing central authorities' critical stance on the Palestine question, calling Israel's military campaign, lasting since Oct. 7th, a "genocide" instead of a war (Catalan News, 2023d). Furthermore, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced that Spain was considering unilaterally recognizing Palestine as a sovereign country if the European Union and its members failed to do so (Catalan News, 2023d; Spain in English, 2023).

The resolution explicitly stated that the relationships with Israel would not be resumed until a definitive ceasefire that ensured adherence to the UN resolutions on the conflict and respect for the Palestinian people's fundamental rights (Catalan News, 2023d). In addition, the resolution also introduced a clause that Barcelona would exclude any operator belonging to or carrying out financial operations or economic activities that violated international humanitarian law in its public contracts (Catalan News, 2023d). It means that Barcelona shall not have a contract deal with any Israeli entity (and its affiliation) operating in the occupied territories of Palestine.

Just like the previous resolution under Colau's mayorship, the second break-up resolution was taken amidst the waves of demonstrations in the Spanish cities, including Barcelona, mainly calling on Israel to stop bombing Gaza. Differently, the latter suggested that the interruption of institutional relations with the Israeli authorities shall not affect the relations between Barcelona and the city of Tel Aviv (Catalan News, 2023d). The relationship could be necessary to bridge the communication with the city since not all citizens in Israel's capital agreed on their authorities' policy towards Palestine.

A couple of resolutions to end bilateral relations between Barcelona and Israel and/or Tel Aviv were the most surprising actions among the European cities since city transnational activism took moral calls as the most common form. Barcelona was the first European city to make a break-up decision with Israel after it had taken a similar decision to the Russian city of St. Petersburg due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine a year before. Such a radical move could be followed by other cities on the continent. Using the local state institution (power, resources) as suggested by Cooper and Herman (2020), the municipal governments of Barcelona were able to capitalize on the solidarity on the Palestine question into legitimate policies, through the city council's approval, such as suspension and exclusion.

However, known for its active grass-roots movements, the pro-Palestinian social activism could contribute to such policies. On the sidelines of the first suspension announcement at the city hall, for example, Mayor Colau admitted to having considered local strong demands from Catalan society to correct Israel's systemic violence and apartheid system imposed on the Palestinians (Catalan News, 2023a). This is in line with an argument that city transnational activism can hardly be free of social movements, as they can actively participate and affect local policymaking, which is, by the norm of democracy embeddedness, as the concept suggests.

2) Oslo (Norway)

Norway officially recognized the State of Israel in 1949, which came shortly after a year of its inception. Branding itself as a "peace mediator" small country in line with its foreign policy principle, Norway attempted to mediate the Palestinian-Israel conflict, paving the way to the Oslo Accords (Eriksson, 2020). Although Norway upholds the commitment to a two-state solution for the long-lasting conflict, as of this writing, like most other EU member countries, it has not yet recognized Palestine.

Parallel to the country's foreign policy vision, Norway's capital, Oslo, is known as a city in which international conflicts are negotiated. As a city that has an interest in international affairs, the city of Oslo increasingly gets involved in various types of cooperation, including participating in international collaborations, organizing global gatherings and events, and taking part in global networks and organizations (Oslo kommune, 2024). Located in the EU region, for example, the city installed an international office in Brussels to gather information and facilitate contacts with the region (Oslo kommune, 2024).

Besides, the city of Oslo, together with other parts of Norway, has a quite long record in transnational activism, especially on the Palestine question, as solidarity on the Palestinian cause against Israel's oppression and occupation. Proposals for boycotting Israel have been promoted by local authorities, either by counties or municipalities, for over 15 years, stimulating pros and cons in Norwegian politics (CNE News, 2021). The boycott encouragement mostly came from the left-wing politicians supported by the BDS movement and other pro-Palestine groups, which then got strong opposition from mainly right-wing politicians. The latter attempted to encourage the limitation of local authorities from making foreign-policy-like decisions (CNE News, 2021).

In April 2023, the Oslo City Council passed a resolution to bar deals with companies whose activities seriously violated basic human rights, international humanitarian law, and workers' rights or caused serious environmental damage or corruption (McAlpin & Omar, 2023). The resolution should not only apply to Israel's occupied territories of Palestine, but also equally apply to other regions with wider issues other than occupation. Regarding the Palestinian cause, the resolution shall bar the import of goods and services produced in Israel's illegal settlements, as well as exclude any company directly or indirectly contributing to Israel's illegal settlement project within the city's procurements (McAlpin & Omar, 2023).

The municipal government of Oslo, which was constituted by the coalition of Socialist Left, Labor, and Green Party, took similar action in 2019 within its 2019-2023 ruling platform. Sunniva Eidsvoll of the Socialist Left Party and the party's City Council group, regarding this move, said:

"The Palestinian people, who have to deal with the illegal occupation of their territory every single day, deserve international attention and support. It is a shared global responsibility to help ensure that human rights and international law are not violated" (BDS National Committee, 2019).

The municipal government of Oslo's moves were aligned with the Norwegian central authorities' stance on the Palestine question. For example, in 2022, the Norwegian central authorities categorized the products produced in Israel and those in the settlement areas due to Norway's only recognition of Israel's pre-1967 boundaries and barred the latter from entering the country (Middle East Monitor, 2023b). The authorities argued that such a decision was in line with the EU's decision calling Israel's settlements in the occupied territories illegal. Regarding the recent conflict, the country condemned the Oct. 7th attack and backed Israel's right to self-defense, but was concerned with Israel's Gaza bombardment, as Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said it was "beyond proportionality" (Kirk, 2023). Norway was one of the majority of countries that favored the UNGA's resolution for a permanent ceasefire and humanitarian pause in Gaza.

In November 2023, the municipal government of Oslo raised Palestine's flag at the city hall as an expression of solidarity and care with the people of Gaza amidst Israel's military assault, which was also attended by Palestinian advocacy groups (Trends, 2023). The flag-waving coincided with the commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, which has been celebrated since 1978 following the adoption of a UNGA resolution. On the sidelines of the event, the Mayor of Oslo, Anne Lindboe, stated:

"When we know that more than 5,000 children have lost their lives, equivalent to more than 275 school classes, it is only natural to remember them today" (Trends, 2023).

The city of Oslo showed its transnational activism in the form of moral calls, political symbolism, and exclusion to support the Palestinian cause. While moral calls like critics of Israel's denial of basic rights for Palestinians were the softest, the exclusion of Israeli products could be the strongest message that the city was against the illegal settlement occupation. Similar to the case of Barcelona, there exists a strong role of social movement groups, especially the BDS, with its global campaign to boycott Israel and put pressure on those supporting and having affiliation to the apartheid regime. The BDS – supported not only by the Palestinian diaspora but also by groups of migrants or minorities – is one of the most active and influential movements in the Norwegian big cities.



Picture 3. Norway's Oslo City Hall Hoists the Palestinian Flag.
Source: Trends (2023)

There was political alignment between the leftist parties and the pro-Palestinian activists in the city, which brought consequences to influencing the municipal policy, as city activism could hardly be free of pressures of civil society groups, as noted by Cooper and Herman (2020). In Oslo, they were strong supporters of Palestinian transnational non-violent resistance like the BDS movement. Furthermore, the leftists had a long tradition of political mobilization concerning the Palestinian cause in Norway (Jacobsen & Andersson, 2012). The city activists had the same purpose as theirs: putting pressure on the Israeli authorities in addition to raising global solidarity for Palestine. The ability to raise municipal decisions for pressure purposes, especially through the city council, was a strength for the city since such legislative power was deemed a novel advantage, as argued by Leffel (2018).

The role of the “responsibility” norm contributed to the city’s behavior, seeing the violation of human rights and international law as serious threats to humanity. Voluntarily taking responsibility encouraged the city to take a role in advocating the Palestinian cause and demanded that Israel comply with international law and respect the human rights of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. As a key concept in activism, as argued by Cooper and Herman (2020), responsibility reflects the municipal government’s ability and willingness to care about and act through local actions on the cross-border issue.

3) Liège and Verviers (Belgium)

Belgium formally recognized the State of Israel in 1949, just after Israel's 1948 statehood declaration. The two nations have maintained diplomatic ties ever since. Belgium's recognition of Israel was a part of the wide international community's acceptance of the newly formed state. Differently, as of this writing, the country has not yet officially recognized Palestine despite its support of the two-state solution.

The Belgian cities have long been known to have active international relations and have been aware of international issues regarding the violation of human rights. The city of Liège, for example, has twinning partnerships with local and foreign cities, including Ramallah, the city in the occupied territory of Palestine’s West Bank. Both cities materialized their twinning cooperation in 2014 (Liège Municipality, 2024). As a city with a strong tradition of grassroots social activism, the formalization of such partnerships was beyond international cooperation for cities’ mutual interests. Instead, it was the move by the city for

its solidarity towards the Palestinian cause and statehood. This paper suggests that the para-diplomacy of the city can be perceived as city activism.

In April 2023, the Liège City Council voted to suspend all relations with the State of Israel, accusing the Israeli authorities of running a regime of “apartheid, colonization and military occupation” (Peoples Dispatch, 2023). Introduced by the Belgian Workers’ Party, supported by the Socialist Party as well as smaller political parties, such as Vega and Green Ardent, the resolution explicitly said:

“a temporary suspension of all relations with the state of Israel and the institutions that are complicit until the Israeli authorities put an end to the systematic violation of the Palestinian people and fully respect the obligations imposed by international law and various United Nations resolutions” (Peoples Dispatch, 2023; Plesea, 2023).

Not only did the resolution mention the systemic violence against the Palestinians committed by Israel, but it also listed Israel’s major violations of international laws (Peoples Dispatch, 2023). Although the move by the city of Liège was seen as symbolic, as it had formal relations with neither Israel nor the Israeli embassy in the country, the measure would prevent the future possibility of such relations. Such a move was responded to by the Israeli Ambassador, calling it “harmful” to the economic interests of Liège and Israel, and also the Palestinians themselves (EU Reporter, 2023).

It was not the first time Liège showed its solidarity with Palestine. Two years before, the city passed a resolution aiming to exclude any businesses with links to Israel’s occupation in the Palestinian territories from municipal contracts (Plesea, 2023). Also, the Liège City Council passed a resolution affirming support for the BDS movement in the city that year (Buxbaum, 2023).

Another Belgian city, Verviers, followed Liège’s move to strengthen its solidarity with the Palestinian cause. By the end of May 2023, the Verviers City Council announced the approval of the motion for relationship prevention introduced by the members of the Socialist Party, the Labor Party, and the Ecologist Confederation (Palestine Chronicle, 2023). Verviers would not have diplomatic connections with the State of Israel and its institutions as long as the Israeli authorities maintained the apartheid regime and continued to violate international law (Palestine Chronicle, 2023).

Both Belgian cities’ stances on the Palestine question were in tandem with Belgium’s foreign policy on Palestine-Israel relations, tending to be more critical of Israel in recent years. Considered the EU member country that was less supportive of Israel, ties between Israel and Belgium experienced several small-scale disruptions over its support for Palestinians. The Belgian central authorities announced control over goods coming from Israel’s illegal settlements in 2021 (The New Arab, 2021) and criticized the disappearance of Palestinian towns and the Israeli armed settlers’ oppression of the Palestinians in the occupied territories in August 2023 (Middle East Monitor, 2023a). At the latest, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo described Israel’s recent military campaign in Gaza as “disproportionate” and “inhumane” (Shankar, 2023).

Liège and Verviers were the third and fourth European cities to take a firm decision against Israel’s policy within the year 2023, following Barcelona and Oslo. Similar to the previous cities discussed, both Belgian cities were known for their activism conducted by civil society groups. Regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict, Liège and Verviers were among the European cities with active pro-Palestinian activism, like the BDS movement.

The BDS is now a global umbrella movement for many pro-Palestinian groups whose activists spread across Europe. Not only hailing the cities’ moves as a win for the BDS movement, the BDS-affiliated, Belgian-Palestinian Association was, for example, also working on pushing the city of Ixelles to cut off its

twinning agreement with the Israeli city of Megiddo, which was originally the Palestinian village of al-Lajjun, whose inhabitants were driven out during the 1948 ethnic cleansing (Buxbaum, 2023). Moreover, Belgium's region of Wallonia, in which Liège and Verviers are located, has a stronger public perception and support for Palestine (Buxbaum, 2023).

While pressures from the constituents and civil society pushed the city to be more progressive on Palestine and shaped local policy thanks to the democracy embeddedness as suggested by the concept, the city's municipal governments, constituted by certain political representatives, were exposed to the norms. As activism is the response to injustice or the violation of certain values, such as human rights and international law, cities shall act to speak up and defend them as a shared responsibility. In addition to the responsibility to care, both Belgian cities could carry out activism thanks to the power and resources with which they issued formal municipal decisions to boycott Israel, either to prevent the relationship or exclude the entities contributing to the illegal settlement. The latter is in line with Cooper and Herman (2020) suggest that the city may use state power and resources to advance demand for social justice.

CONCLUSION

In the middle of strong support for Israel coming from predominantly Western countries, especially those in Europe, several European cities showed the opposite direction. The cities demonstrated their solidarity to back the Palestinian cause in their own ways, called activism, which were sometimes stronger than what their central authorities took on the Palestine-Israel conflict. In other words, the cities' moves were progressive – if not called radical – in expressing solidarity with the Palestine question.

Transnational activism by the cities assessed shows a similarity that the cities were ruled by the left-wing political elements, together with the existence of a lively tradition of urban grassroots social activism. Despite similarity, this paper suggests Barcelona activism could be the most progressive among other cities examined. Not only is it due to the municipal government's first contentious actions to respond to Israel's genocidal war, but it is also due to the historical factor affecting identity and the current political landscape in the city.

Cities alone may not be capable of forcing a state actor like Israel to change its policy toward Palestinians and the occupied territories of a future Palestinian state through locally taken pressures. Nonetheless, transnational activism reveals that cities are capable of calling upon or championing global norms such as human rights, international law, and non-violent resolution surrounding the deep-rooted conflict between the two political entities.

Limited literature on city activism could be a limitation for this paper. Neither does this paper provide a deep analysis of the leftist politics at the local level affecting the cities' transnational activism, as well as the contested norms to which the cities are exposed. Cities may comply with a certain global norm (e.g., human rights, international law, etc.) over a local norm (e.g., unity or harmony in foreign policy between local and central authorities) when it comes to a global issue like a conflict. Future research may best address the question.

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