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**Geopolitics on the Streets: The Symbolic Connections between Northern  
Ireland, Palestine, and Israel in Murals and Flags**

MA thesis

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## ***Authorship Declaration***

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how murals and flags in Northern Ireland express symbolic solidarity with the Israel–Palestine conflict, revealing how visual culture is used to construct and perform geopolitical identity in a post-conflict setting. Drawing on critical and popular geopolitics, as well as theories of space, memory, and representation, the study investigates how Catholic/Republican and Protestant/Unionist communities visually align themselves with Palestine and Israel, respectively. Using visual discourse analysis, it analyses a dataset of murals and flags photographed in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in 2024, supplemented by archival material.

The findings show that Republican communities primarily express solidarity through murals that link Irish anti-colonial narratives to the Palestinian struggle, using visual tropes such as martyrdom, resistance, and shared historical grievance. In contrast, Unionist communities more often use flags to signal allegiance with Israel, reflecting themes of religious identification, statehood, and ideological continuity. These differences reflect deeper cultural and strategic choices in visual communication, shaped by the historical development of each community's representational practices. The thesis concludes that murals and flags are not merely reflective of identity, but are active tools in the ongoing spatial production of post-conflict political meaning, embedding local narratives within global frameworks of solidarity and opposition.

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## Introduction

In post-conflict societies, the boundaries between memory, identity, and space are rarely static. In Northern Ireland, more than two decades after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, visual culture remains a key medium through which divided communities assert presence, remember the past, and project political meaning. Murals and flags, as staples of Northern Ireland's symbolic landscape, do not merely decorate the urban environment; they act as territorial markers, vehicles of commemoration, and instruments of ideological messaging. Their persistence in both Catholic/Republican and Protestant/Unionist communities reflects the ongoing significance of visual discourse in shaping how the legacy of conflict is interpreted and how political allegiances are communicated in public space.

This thesis investigates how murals and flags in Northern Ireland express geopolitical solidarity with the Israel–Palestine conflict, and what this reveals about post-conflict identity and spatial politics. While the Israel–Palestine conflict and the Troubles differ in many respects, they share a legacy of partition, colonially influenced state formation, ethno-national division, and long-term political violence. These parallels have made them symbolically potent in Northern Irish discourse, particularly through analogies drawn by both communities to articulate their own historical narratives. Republican murals often feature Palestinian imagery and iconography to emphasize solidarity grounded in shared experience of resistance to occupation, historical injustice, and anti-colonial struggle. In contrast, Loyalist expressions of support for Israel tend to appear in the form of flags, often incorporating biblical references and state symbolism that reflect theological and ideological alignment rather than shared victimhood. This contrast between murals and flags, as well as the form, tone, and frequency of their deployment, suggests a deeper divergence in how the two communities position themselves within global political narratives.

By combining visual discourse analysis (Rose, 2012) with frameworks from critical and popular geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1999; Hughes, 2007), this thesis interprets murals and flags as discursive texts that not only reflect political identity but construct it. Drawing on semiotic analysis and spatial theory, it argues that these visual forms are embedded in post-conflict symbolic struggles that remain active and evolving. Murals and flags are not static images; they are dynamic political acts, shaping both how communities remember the past and how they engage with the present.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 outlines the conceptual and theoretical framework, discussing how critical geopolitics, popular geopolitics, and memory studies inform the analysis of visual culture in divided societies. It also introduces the rationale for treating both murals and flags as relevant sources, despite their formal differences. Chapter 2 presents the research questions, methodological approach, and data collection process, explaining the use of visual discourse analysis and the decision to compare the visual practices of both Republican and Unionist communities. Chapter 3 provides historical context, tracing the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict, the evolution of murals and flags as political tools, and the symbolic parallels with the Israel–Palestine conflict. Chapter 4 contains the empirical analysis, divided into three parts: Republican murals, Unionist murals and flags, and a comparative analysis that synthesizes the main findings. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of those findings in relation to the research questions and theoretical frameworks, exploring how visual culture both reflects and reproduces symbolic boundaries in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The final chapter concludes by summarizing the thesis’s main contributions and proposing directions for future research.

By focusing on how visual symbols are used to articulate geopolitical alignment, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about memory, identity, and political expression in post-conflict societies. It also highlights the ways in which local divisions are sustained and reimagined through global frameworks, demonstrating that even after the end of formal violence, symbolic conflict continues. Mapped not only onto walls and flagpoles, but onto the political imagination of two divided communities.

# **1. Conceptualization and theoretical framework**

Understanding the role of murals and flags in Northern Ireland's political landscape requires a theoretical framework that accounts for the intersection of visual culture and geopolitical identity. This section conceptualizes these visual symbols through the lens of critical geopolitics, with a particular focus on popular geopolitics and symbolic conflict. By situating Northern Irish murals and flags within these frameworks, this thesis explores how local political struggles are visually connected conflicts with global impact, particularly through expressions of solidarity with Israel and Palestine. Through this conceptualization, the study establishes a foundation for analysing the murals and flags not only as artistic or historical artifacts but as active participants in ongoing geopolitical narratives.

## **1.1 Critical and Popular Geopolitics: Frameworks for Understanding Visual Power**

Geopolitics is essential for understanding the contemporary world because it examines how space, power, and identity intersect in both global and local contexts. As Klaus Dodds (2007) emphasizes, despite the increasing interconnectivity brought about by globalization, territorial disputes, boundary conflicts, and struggles over sovereignty continue to shape international relations and domestic politics. Geopolitics helps us understand these struggles by examining how places are represented and contested through material practices like war, diplomacy, and borders, as well as symbolic practices such as maps, narratives, and public discourse (Dodds, 2007). It provides a lens through which we can critically evaluate how terms like "axis of evil" or "Third World" produce geopolitical meaning, influencing not just policy but public imagination. This thesis draws on that critical approach to geopolitics by examining how Republican and Unionist communities in Northern Ireland use visual symbols (murals and flags) to express solidarity with the Israel–Palestine conflict. In doing so, it situates local expressions of identity within broader geopolitical narratives, demonstrating how visual culture is a key arena where global affiliations and post-conflict identities are constructed and contested.

One of the central theoretical approaches informing this thesis is critical geopolitics, which seeks to uncover the power relations embedded in the production of geopolitical knowledge. Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1999) conceptualizes critical geopolitics as a “problematizing” theoretical enterprise that interrogates how geopolitical knowledge is produced and entwined with power. Rather than treating geopolitical discourse as neutral truth, this approach exposes how

ostensibly objective geopolitical narratives often project the cultural-political perspectives of dominant actors while concealing their own power-laden assumptions (Ó Tuathail, 1999:108). From this vantage, geopolitical “knowledge” is always situated, reflecting particular cultural viewpoints and marginalizing others, rather than a natural view from nowhere. Within this framework, Ó Tuathail highlights *popular geopolitics* as the intersection of geopolitics with everyday media and culture, the realm in which popular media (news, film, cartoons, etc.) construct and circulate collective geopolitical understandings of “us” and “them” (Ó Tuathail, 1999:110). In doing so, critical geopolitics provides a useful lens through which to analyse how everyday cultural forms shape and reproduce political identities.

Klaus Dodds (2007) reinforces this by arguing that geopolitics is not limited to elite-level diplomacy or military strategy but is constantly reproduced through symbolic and cultural practices. He warns against viewing geopolitics as something only states or experts engage in; instead, it is a socially embedded and discursively constructed phenomenon that permeates how people make sense of the world around them. Dodds shows that phrases like “rogue state” or “war on terror” do more than describe, as they prescribe ways of thinking, feeling, and acting geopolitically (Dodds, 2007). By emphasizing the cultural circulation of geopolitical language, Dodds contributes to the understanding that maps, headlines, school textbooks, and visual artifacts like murals or flags are not just representations, but part of how space and power are imagined and enacted. These perspectives align closely with this thesis, which considers how Republican and Unionist communities inscribe geopolitical meaning into their local landscapes through symbolic forms that speak not only to their past but to their position within broader global struggles.

Building on this, popular geopolitics specifically emphasizes the role of visual culture in shaping how geopolitical narratives are constructed and contested in the public sphere. Rachel Hughes (2007) extends this perspective by emphasizing the power of visibility and representation: images and other visual media are not passive mirrors of geopolitical reality but active agents in its construction. Visual artifacts, such as murals, flags, and public displays, thus become sites where geopolitical narratives are produced, reinforced, or challenged; they can license particular visions of identity and space or undermine them through alternative representations (Hughes, 2007: 979). Underlying this is the recognition that vision itself is culturally constructed rather than purely natural, meaning that how we see the world (and delineate “us” versus “them”) is conditioned by social context and power relations. As such,

popular geopolitics offers a critical framework for understanding how visual materials function as sites where identities and geopolitical meaning are negotiated through representational power.

A pivotal contribution to this line of thought comes from Klaus Dodds' (1998) analysis of the political cartoons of Steve Bell, which helped establish visual culture as a legitimate focus of critical geopolitics. Rather than dismissing cartoons and similar media as irrelevant or frivolous distractions from international affairs, Dodds (1998) challenges this limited view by positioning such imagery within a broader network of mass-mediated culture, that powerfully frames public understandings of global politics. His work emphasizes that geopolitical iconography should not be treated as a neutral object of academic interpretation, but instead demands analytical sensitivity to both authorial context and audience impact (Dodds, 1998:170). This approach shifts the focus away from elite-driven discourse alone and instead calls for critical geopolitics to engage with popular and visual culture as serious sites of political meaning-making. Importantly, Dodds (1998:195) urges scholars to move beyond mere interpretation and toward a form of engaged critique that confronts the injustices and inequalities embedded in political leadership, war media, and public discourse. For this thesis, Dodds' (1998) work was especially influential in framing murals and flags not just as cultural artifacts, but as active participants in the spatial and symbolic performance of political identity. It reaffirmed the value of approaching visual material through a critical geopolitical lens that recognizes the everyday, affective, and contested dimensions of geopolitical expression.

More recent work in popular geopolitics builds on these insights by shifting attention from the production of geopolitical messages to their interpretation and everyday enactment. Dittmer and Dodds (2008) highlight how early scholarship often privileged elite-produced texts, such as films or news media, while underestimating how audiences interact with and emotionally respond to them. In response, Dittmer and Gray (2010) propose a "popular geopolitics 2.0" that incorporates feminist geopolitics, non-representational theory, and audience studies to foreground embodiment, emotion, and performativity. This approach decentralizes elite authorship and instead views geopolitics as enacted through everyday practices, whether watching the news, hanging a flag, or walking past a mural. Importantly, it recognizes audiences not as passive recipients but as active participants who bring their own identities, experiences, and emotions to geopolitical narratives. For this thesis, this means that the murals and flags analyzed are not just messages sent. They are also lived, interpreted, and felt as part

of a broader spatial performance of identity. This focus on the everyday, affective, and embodied dimensions of geopolitical expression is essential for capturing how visual culture in Northern Ireland becomes a site for both local memory and global political alignment.

## **1.2 Space, Territory, and the Production of Place**

Spatial context is integral to the political work that murals and flags perform. Drawing from critical human geography, this thesis considers space not as a neutral backdrop but as an actively produced and contested domain. As Rolston (2003) argues, murals are strategically placed to mark territory, assert control, and inscribe historical narratives onto the urban fabric. Their visibility in public space ensures that political messages are not only seen but also experienced as part of everyday life. In this sense, the placement of murals and flags contributes to what Henri Lefebvre (1991) calls the “production of space,” reinforcing ideological boundaries and shaping how communities relate to their environment. According to Lefebvre (1991), space is shaped by three interrelated dimensions: spatial practices (the physical and material use of space), representations of space (planned, official, or institutional understandings of space), and representational spaces (the lived and symbolic experiences of space). Murals and flags operate across all three: they materialize spatial claims, challenge or reinforce dominant narratives, and shape how communities emotionally and politically relate to their surroundings. In this sense, their placement reinforces ideological boundaries and reaffirms collective identity, turning ordinary streets into politically charged environments.

This conceptualization of space as dynamic and constructed also intersects with broader debates in political geography about how space is organized, represented, and imbued with meaning. John O’Loughlin (2003) argues that spatial analysis must move beyond geometric arrangements to explore how space is used as a strategic tool in the pursuit of political objectives, whether through territorial demarcation, symbolic claims, or embodied presence. Space, in this framework, is never innocent. It is deeply political and always in the process of being made. Karen Till (2003) complements this by focusing on how place becomes a repository of memory. Spatial environments are imbued with emotional, historical, and symbolic significance that binds individual and collective identities to specific sites (Till, 2003). These memory-laden landscapes, often created through visual interventions like murals or commemorative practices, are not passive reflections of the past but active participants in shaping how communities understand their histories and political identities.

Adding to this theoretical foundation, John Agnew (2003) cautions against abstract understandings of space that ignore the uneven power relations embedded in its production. In his critique of the traditional geopolitical gaze, he urges scholars to “turn time into space,” emphasizing how historical narratives are spatialized through visual and political practices that sustain national or communal imaginaries. This aligns with Ruth Panelli’s (2004) call for a relational and embodied understanding of place-making. She suggests that place is not a fixed container but is continuously shaped through everyday practices, representations, and power relations that affect who belongs, who is excluded, and how spatial identities are negotiated (Panelli, 2004). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that murals and flags do not simply mark space. They produce place through acts of remembering, identifying, and performing community. By embedding historical narratives and political aspirations into the material and symbolic landscape, these visual forms help constitute place as both a site of memory and a medium of power.

### **1.3 Murals and Flags as Sites of Memory and Political Identity**

In Northern Ireland, the tradition of mural painting dates back to the early 20th century. While murals are a common feature in many societies as they are used to enrich public spaces, celebrate cultural heritage, and showcase artistic skill, they have taken on a particularly political character in the Northern Irish context (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition, 2021). Unlike in other regions where murals often serve decorative or cultural purposes, in Northern Ireland they have primarily functioned as vehicles for political expression. They convey a wide range of messages, from the commemoration of historical events and individuals to the articulation of ideological beliefs and expressions of international solidarity (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition, 2021). Over time, these murals have become powerful visual narratives of identity, memory, and resistance, deeply embedded within the divided urban landscape. Their continued presence on the walls of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry reflects not only the legacy of the Troubles but also the evolving geopolitical consciousness of the communities that create and maintain them.

Flags remain central symbols in post-conflict Northern Ireland, serving as potent expressions of political identity and cultural allegiance within a still-divided society. Yet their display is often deeply contentious, as public flag displays often function as markers of territory and assertions of communal dominance, demarcating “us” from “them” and sometimes provoking intimidation or conflict (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition, 2021). In its

Final Report (2021), the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition underscores that these emblems assumed renewed significance after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, demonstrating how tightly flag symbolism remains interwoven with questions of identity and sovereignty in the peace process era. This enduring flag culture is evident not only in the rivalry between Union flags and Irish tricolours, each symbolically claiming Northern Ireland for Britain or Ireland respectively, but also in the appropriation of external symbols, with loyalist areas flying Israeli flags and nationalist areas flying Palestinian flags to project solidarity with the Israel–Palestine conflict and mirror local divides. Ultimately, the continued salience of flags in Northern Ireland underscores that they are far more than mere decorations: they function as charged political symbols that uphold communal identities, visibly mark contested space, and even extend to expressions of geopolitical alignment (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, 2021).

Murals in Northern Ireland have long functioned as powerful tools for expressing political identity and demarcating community boundaries. Rolston (2003) emphasizes that murals are not just visual images but spatially situated artifacts, embedded in local political struggles and intimately tied to shifts in ideological positioning. Rather than treating murals as static representations, he frames them as dynamic expressions of political engagement, capable of mobilizing, memorializing, and reinforcing community allegiances. Similarly, Hill and White (2012) explore how murals have historically reflected sectarian divides, particularly as expressions of loyalist and republican cultural identities. They argue that these murals form a highly visible “visual environment” that reinforces spatial segregation and social division. Crowley (2022) also affirms that murals serve as a form of vernacular political communication, often rooted in working-class communities that may lack access to formal political platforms. His extensive photographic archive documents how murals enable both republican and loyalist communities to assert their presence and narrate their political convictions through public space. Taken together, these studies establish murals as crucial vehicles for asserting identity and community belonging in a deeply divided society.

Murals and flags in Northern Ireland also function as tools of memory, embedding personal and collective histories into the urban landscape. As Crowley (2022) and Rolston (2011) argue, these visual forms operate as grassroots memory archives that commemorate loss, sacrifice, and struggle. In a post-conflict society, the control over memory becomes deeply political, shaping how the past is remembered and who gets to tell its story. By aligning with conflicts

with global impact like Israel–Palestine, these murals extend the scope of memory beyond the local, embedding local identity into a transnational framework of historical grievance and solidarity. This use of memory as both political expression and collective identity formation aligns with Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. These are places, symbols, or practices that preserve the memory of events or identities in contexts where traditional, lived memory has begun to fade. In Northern Ireland, where collective memory remains a central force in sustaining community boundaries and political allegiances, murals and flags serve as spatial anchors for remembering contested pasts. As sites of memory, these visual symbols function both to recall and to instruct, preserving interpretations of history for current and future generations while asserting a specific communal vision of justice, resistance, or sovereignty. In this way, murals and flags become living memorials that continuously negotiate the meaning of the past in the political present.

A central function of Northern Ireland’s murals has been the commemoration of those who participated in or were affected by the Troubles. Rolston (2011) underscores the role of murals in shaping memory cultures, arguing that they act as repositories of collective memory that help communities “reach the future through the past.” Republican murals often portray hunger strikers, fallen volunteers, and iconic political figures, transforming the landscape into a commemorative archive. This practice is echoed in Crowley’s (2022) analysis of murals as, which visually transmit narratives of sacrifice and struggle across generations. His research also reveals a shift in tone from paramilitary glorification to humanized portrayals of everyday individuals, a change that reflects broader efforts to recast republican identity in post-conflict terms. He adds further nuance by framing murals as mnemonic devices that both reflect and shape collective interpretations of the past, arguing that murals often serve to crystallize a specific reading of historical events, frequently one that resists state-sponsored versions of memory (Crowley, 2022). In this way, murals not only commemorate but also contest the meanings of the conflict and its legacy.

As the Executive Office of Northern Ireland’s Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition’s report (2021) shows, there has been a change in the number and nature of flags, as well as how often they are flown. Flags are more often displayed on the streets for a longer period of time and on streetlamps or posts rather than in front of homes (Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition, 2021). This shift reflects a transformation in how political identity and territoriality are asserted in Northern Ireland. The increased presence of flags in

public spaces suggests a move toward more permanent and visible claims over territory, reinforcing sectarian divisions rather than diminishing them. This trend aligns with Harrison's (1995) concept of proprietary contests, where competing groups use symbols to mark and reinforce their presence in contested places. The endurance of this practice demonstrates how visual symbolism remains a key mechanism for expressing political allegiance and maintaining divisions.

The inclusion of Israeli flags alongside Unionist symbols forms part of a larger effort to define Loyalist identity in relation to global political struggles. Bryan (2018) highlights how these flags are often flown in working-class Loyalist areas, not merely as expressions of solidarity, but as "political signals" that mark space and reinforce ideological positioning. The pairing of the Israeli flag with the Union Jack or Ulster Banner communicates more than support. It asserts a vision of the Loyalist community as part of a global front in the defence of Western, Judeo-Christian values. According to Bryan, this alignment is particularly appealing because it allows Loyalists to frame themselves as besieged defenders of identity and tradition, drawing parallels between their own political marginalization and the Israeli state's security discourse. The Israeli flag, then, becomes a proxy for shared narratives of victimhood, resistance, and legitimacy, mirroring how Palestinian symbolism functions in Catholic/Republican areas.

The post-ceasefire period has witnessed significant efforts to reshape the visual landscape of Northern Ireland through state-led mural replacement programs. Hill and White (2012) analyse the Re-imagining Communities initiative, a government-funded effort aimed at replacing overtly sectarian murals with more neutral or positive imagery. They view this as both a governance strategy and a peacebuilding mechanism, albeit one fraught with tension over artistic control, authenticity, and community buy-in. Rolston (2003) similarly critiques the political instrumentalization of murals, noting that attempts to "sanitize" public space often clash with grassroots desires to retain memory and identity. His work highlights how mural transition processes, especially when imposed from above, risk depoliticizing deeply meaningful visual traditions. Crowley (2022) also explores the tension between grassroots expression and top-down transformation, emphasizing that visual interventions often reveal underlying discomforts within the peace process itself. These studies collectively illustrate how the evolving mural landscape reflects broader debates about reconciliation, memory governance, and cultural legitimacy in post-conflict societies.

The decision to analyse murals and flags as representations of geopolitical connections stems from the availability of empirical data. Both forms of visual representation have been extensively studied in the context of Northern Ireland's history, particularly in relation to the Troubles. Research indicates that the significance of flags and murals as symbols of identity and commemoration has endured beyond the conflict, continuing to shape political and cultural discourse (Brown & MacGinty, 2003). Given this, the inclusion of flags in the visual dataset is not only appropriate but essential. In contrast to murals, which often require significant artistic labour and community buy-in, flags can be rapidly deployed, allowing them to respond more quickly to political developments. Their role in asserting geopolitical identity, particularly through references to Israel, performs a similar function to murals in Republican areas that evoke Palestine. Both serve to internationalize local identity. By approaching murals and flags together, this thesis adopts a comprehensive visual methodology that captures the full spectrum of symbolic expression in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how territorial and ideological identities are constructed, maintained, and contested in post-conflict societies.

#### **1.4 Symbolism, Conflict, and Transnational Alignments**

Symbolism plays a crucial role in the perpetuation of divisions stemming from the Troubles. Simon Harrison's (1995) article *Four Types of Symbolic Conflict* provides a theoretical framework for understanding political symbolism by analysing various symbolic conflicts. In his study, Harrison classifies the Northern Irish conflict as a proprietary contest, wherein opposing groups perceive their symbols as exclusive to their own identity. Tensions arise when the "other" appropriates or displays these collective symbols, reinforcing divisions and exacerbating conflict (Harrison, 1995:258). This dynamic is evident in the use of Israeli and Palestinian flags, as well as competing murals, in Northern Ireland's urban landscape. Israeli flags first appeared on Belfast's streets in 2002, largely as a Unionist response to the Palestinian flags prominently displayed in Republican neighbourhoods (Hill & White, 2008). Even in the post-conflict period, symbolic appropriation and counter-symbolism serve as mechanisms through which political and sectarian divisions persist, illustrating how visual markers continue to shape and sustain contested identities.

Beyond local conflict, Northern Irish murals frequently articulate transnational messages of solidarity, particularly in relation to the Israel–Palestine conflict. Crowley (2022) documents how republican murals often incorporate Palestinian symbols to draw parallels between Irish

nationalist struggles and broader anti-colonial or anti-imperialist causes. He expands on this by situating such imagery within a global framework of resistance, noting that international references serve to legitimate local political positions by aligning them with widely recognized causes (Crowley, 2022). Conversely, loyalist murals and flag displays have invoked solidarity with Israel, constructing an opposing geopolitical narrative that equates unionist identity with support for state security and opposition to insurgency. These visual alignments reflect not just ideological sympathies but also act as strategic assertions of moral legitimacy. As Hill and White (2012) suggest, such international symbols complicate efforts to neutralize sectarian imagery, as they often reintroduce contested narratives into the public realm. In this context, murals function as forms of “popular geopolitics”, embedding global political alliances into local identity discourses.

## **2. Research design**

Building on the conceptual framework developed in this chapter, the following section outlines the research puzzle and design that guide this thesis. By examining murals and flags as visual articulations of political identity, territoriality, and transnational solidarity, this project engages with how popular geopolitical narratives are constructed and displayed in everyday urban space. The empirical focus on Northern Ireland, where visual culture remains deeply entangled with post-conflict identity, offers a compelling case for exploring how global affiliations, particularly with Israel and Palestine, are visually embedded into local landscapes. Chapter 2 sets out the core questions, scope, and methodological approach through which these visual materials are interpreted.

### **2.1 Research puzzle and expectations**

The Troubles in Northern Ireland ended in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement. Even though the conflict is officially resolved, it echoes through the communities to this day. The conflict had two clear sides: Catholic/Republican/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist. These two sides are still separated in two of the biggest cities (Belfast and Derry/Londonderry) both physically, through the continued existence of peace walls, and mentally, through differing school systems and the issue of the Irish language, which was granted official language status in 2022.

This thesis argues that murals and flags displayed in Northern Ireland play an important role in the continuation of the conflict, which has technically been solved for almost thirty years. Even

though the murals have moved away from projecting the Troubles, they still differ among the two communities. When taking a walk through Falls Road, a historically Republican neighbourhood, the murals connect the struggles of a united Ireland with the struggle for independence of Palestine. The Unionist neighbourhoods show support for Israel, although not as bluntly. The aim of the thesis is to understand how this support is constructed through these symbols.

### **Primary Research Question:**

- How do the murals and flags in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry reflect and construct local geopolitical identities, and how are these connected to conflicts with global impact such as the Israel-Palestine conflict?

### **Secondary Research Questions:**

- How do the murals and flags function as expressions of political identity and memory within Northern Ireland's communities?
- What symbolic elements and visual representations in the murals and flags align the Catholic/republican community with the Palestinian struggle and the Protestant/unionist community with Israel?
- Why do Republican and Unionist communities adopt different visual forms (murals and flags) to express similar geopolitical themes?
- What kind of similarities/differences are displayed in their representation of local and global political struggles?

### **Research Expectations**

This thesis expects to uncover how murals and flags in Northern Ireland do not merely reflect, but actively construct local and global political identities. Through visual and discourse analysis, it is anticipated that Catholic/Republican murals will prominently depict symbols and narratives aligning with the Palestinian struggle, with themes of liberation, anti-colonialism, and resistance forming the visual and ideological core. These parallels may draw explicitly on shared historical experiences, particularly the partition of Ireland under British rule and that of Palestine during the British Mandate, each resulting in territorial division, displacement, and

long-standing conflict. It is expected that such historical analogies are visually and symbolically exploited in Republican murals to emphasize solidarity and shared grievance.

In contrast, Protestant/Unionist murals and flags are anticipated to incorporate subtler, but no less meaningful, references to Israel. These may include the Star of David, biblical quotations, or historically framed narratives of military loyalty. While these symbols can be interpreted as counterpoints to Republican-Palestinian expressions, this thesis also expects to uncover deeper motivations. Specifically, Unionist support for Israel may be rooted in religious identification, particularly among evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant traditions that view Israel as a divinely promised land. This alignment is likely to reflect theological narratives of chosenness, sovereignty, and the defence of Judeo-Christian civilization, rather than mere political reaction.

Furthermore, the research anticipates that murals and flags serve dual purposes: preserving local memory within the context of Northern Ireland's Troubles, while fostering alignment with broader international struggles. The comparative analysis is expected to reveal distinct representational logics, with Republican visual culture leaning toward affective, narrative-based portrayals of transnational solidarity, and Unionist visual expressions relying more on emblematic, theological, and historical imagery. Together, these visual forms are expected to map a symbolic geography in which Northern Ireland's local divisions are entangled with and animated by conflicts with global implications and spiritual identifications.

## **2.2 Methodology**

The analysis for the thesis will be done using visual discourse analysis techniques provided by Gillian Rose (2012) in her book "Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials". The book introduces two approaches to visual discourse analysis, which differ from the way institutions and technology are prioritized. As the first approach focuses more on the site of the image, as well as the complexities and contradictions of the discourse (Rose, 2012:225), the thesis will be based on that.

The first approach to visual discourse analysis has many advantages and disadvantages. For the aim of this thesis, it is important to note that this methodology is concerned with the production of social difference through the chosen visual imagery (Rose, 2012, 224). This is especially relevant when analysing murals and flags in Northern Ireland, as these visuals actively construct and reinforce sectarian identities and geopolitical affiliations. It also

addresses the questions of power in the materials themselves. This allows the analysis to uncover how authority, legitimacy, and resistance are visually encoded through spatial placement, symbolism, and rhetorical framing. The first disadvantage lies in when to stop making intercontextual connections or at least how to make them convincingly productive (Rose, 2012, p. 224). In this thesis, this challenge is addressed by grounding interpretations in historical context and consistent symbolic patterns across multiple examples, thereby avoiding speculative or unsupported readings. Another disadvantage is that discourse analysis is not always clear about its relation with context, since it does not look at the production and archiving, nor the effects of these practices (Rose, 2012, 224). To mitigate this, the analysis remains closely tied to the spatial and political environments in which the images appear, ensuring that interpretations are informed by both local context and broader geopolitical narratives.

The steps to conduct visual discourse analysis in this way are to familiarize yourself with the images, identify key themes, understand how the discourse works to persuade the viewer, and finally see if there are any contradictions or complexities (Rose, 2012). This process involves not only interpreting what is visually represented, but also examining how meaning is constructed through composition, symbolism, and context. It requires attention to both the formal qualities of the image (such as color, layout, and focal points) and its discursive framing like how it draws on broader narratives, values, and ideologies. Importantly, this approach also considers the social and spatial positioning of the viewer, as meaning emerges through the interaction between image and audience. By moving beyond surface-level description to engage with the layers of meaning embedded in visual representation, this method allows for a nuanced exploration of how power, identity, and place are visually performed and communicated. This step-by-step process makes it possible to critically examine how murals and flags not only reflect political discourse but also actively participate in constructing geopolitical identities in the public sphere.

Visual discourse analysis aligns closely with the frameworks of critical and popular geopolitics. Drawing on Ó Tuathail's (1999) conceptualization of critical geopolitics and Hughes's (2007) extension into visual culture, the analysis recognizes that murals and flags are not neutral representations but culturally situated constructions of space, identity, and power. Visual semiotics also informs the reading of these images, particularly in identifying the denotative

and connotative meanings embedded in recurring symbols such as national flags, religious emblems, and transnational motifs.

This research adopts a case study approach focused on murals and flags in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. A case study design is especially appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon (visual representation) within its real-world context. The selected sites offer rich, localized examples of how space, identity, and memory intersect through visual culture. Murals and flags in both cities reflect the historical and contemporary political divides between Republican/Nationalist and Loyalist/Unionist communities. Their public display contributes to symbolic territoriality and demarcates ideological boundaries. By focusing on these cities, the thesis analyses how visual expressions engage with themes of commemoration, identity, and geopolitical solidarity in an urban post-conflict environment.

### **2.3 Data collection**

The primary dataset consists of photographs taken by the author in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in September 2024. These images were captured during guided tours that emphasized the spatial, artistic, and demographic differences between the two communities. To ensure balanced representation, the author also conducted an independent visit to the predominantly Unionist neighbourhood of Sandy Row.

On the Republican side, the murals selected for analysis prominently feature Irish and Palestinian flags, as well as imagery linked to paramilitary groups from both conflicts, highlighting a clear visual connection between Irish republicanism and Palestinian struggles. In contrast, while Loyalist neighbourhoods contain a wealth of murals, posters, and memorials, their connections to the Israel/Palestine conflict are less overtly depicted. Instead, expressions of solidarity are more frequently conveyed through the widespread display of Israeli flags. Given this difference in visual representation, the thesis incorporates both murals and flags as key elements of analysis, recognizing their role in shaping narratives of identity, political allegiance, and transnational solidarity.

The dataset thus also includes photographs of flags collected over several years by Professor Dominic Bryan of Queen's University Belfast. These images constitute a significant portion of the data representing the Unionist/Loyalist/Protestant perspective. The flags were selected based on their explicit visual connections between Loyalist Northern Irish identity and Israel.

These connections are evident in the pairing of the Union Jack with the Israeli flag, the inclusion of relevant biblical verses, and the use of symbolic imagery such as the Star of David. The repeated appearance of these symbols reflects a deliberate effort to align Loyalist identity with broader geopolitical narratives, particularly through expressions of solidarity with Israel. This visual discourse reinforces territorial and ideological boundaries within Northern Ireland, demonstrating how symbolism continues to play a crucial role in shaping political affiliations and contested identities.

While Loyalist areas contain many murals, their thematic focus diverges sharply from that of Republican muralism. Tony Crowley's (2022) comprehensive digital archive which comprises over 15,000 photographs demonstrates that Republican murals are far more likely to include international themes, especially those expressing solidarity with Palestine. In contrast, Loyalist murals are typically centred on local memory, paramilitary identity, British heritage, and defence of tradition. Crowley (2022) observes that Republican murals engage in broader transnational solidarity, including causes in Palestine, Latin America, and South Africa, while Loyalist murals tend to focus on identity, tradition, and historical commemoration within a local-national framework. This thematic gap explains the decision to focus more heavily on flags in the Unionist/Loyalist visual data. Although Loyalist mural production is abundant, the visual alignment with Israel is much more frequently articulated through flags. These flags incorporate Zionist imagery into a Loyalist symbolic framework, often displayed in interface areas and on lamp posts. As Crowley's archive confirms, there were no examples of Loyalist murals expressing solidarity with Palestine or Israel, further justifying the inclusion of flags as the primary comparative material on the Unionist side.

On the Republican side, the International Wall on Divis Street in West Belfast stands as a significant and intentional site of visual discourse. As Crowley (2022) explains, this wall became a dedicated space for Republican mural production after 2000, and it continues to serve as a canvas for murals articulating internationalist sympathies. While this strategy has roots in the Troubles, when Republican groups actively sought to "internationalize the conflict", the post-conflict aim has evolved. Today, the wall connects Irish Republican identity to ongoing radical and resistance movements abroad, including solidarity with Palestinians, Basques, and Latin American struggles. However, Crowley (2022, 100) emphasizes that these murals are not merely extensions of Provisional republicanism's wartime politics; rather, they represent a

reframing of international engagement, shifting from tactical alignment toward a broader, moral and ideological positioning within global struggles.

Moreover, the International Wall exemplifies how mural space itself is politicized and curated. Located on the boundary wall of the former Andrews Flour Mill, the site functions as a living, changing archive, a place where Republican communities project their continued political engagement in visual form. As Crowley (2022, 100) notes, the wall not only reflects solidarity but produces it, drawing connections between local memory and global justice movements. This curated aspect explains why so many of the murals analysed in this thesis come from this location: it is one of the few places where Republican visual culture consistently and deliberately engages in transnational discourse, particularly with Palestine.

In sum, the selection of visual material in this thesis was guided by both thematic relevance and empirical availability. While the visual culture of both communities remains vibrant, it is shaped by distinct representational logics. Republican muralism has developed into a curated, ideologically consistent platform here international solidarity, particularly with Palestine, is an ongoing visual project. Especially in places like the International Wall. In contrast, Loyalist visual solidarity with Israel emerges more distinctly through flag displays rather than murals, a pattern supported by both field observations and Crowley's digital archive. By acknowledging this asymmetry and adjusting the dataset accordingly, the thesis is able to reflect the actual terrain of symbolic geopolitics in Northern Ireland, rather than imposing artificial symmetry. This methodological flexibility enables a more accurate and grounded comparative analysis of how transnational political identities are constructed and maintained in visually distinct but ideologically parallel ways.

### **3. Historical and political context**

This chapter provides the necessary historical and political context for understanding how murals and flags have come to function as instruments of identity and geopolitical expression in Northern Ireland. By outlining the origins and legacy of the conflict known as the Troubles, the chapter situates the visual material within the broader dynamics of sectarian division, contested memory, and post-conflict identity. It also examines the development of mural culture and flag practices within both Republican and Unionist communities, highlighting their divergent trajectories and symbolic functions. Finally, the chapter explores the historical and ideological parallels drawn between the Northern Irish conflict and the Israel–Palestine

struggle, which have shaped the international dimensions of visual solidarity. Together, these sections lay the groundwork for the empirical analysis that follows, illustrating how local and global narratives have become visually entangled in the divided urban spaces of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.

### **3.1 The Conflict in Northern Ireland: Historical Overview**

The contemporary political conflict in Northern Ireland, commonly referred to as “The Troubles”, is one of the most recent and intense chapter in a longer history of colonization, territorial contestation, and identity-based division. While the formal period of the Troubles is typically dated from the late 1960s until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, its causes lie in the longer arc of Irish-British relations, particularly the partition of Ireland and the British state’s role in constructing and sustaining structural inequalities along sectarian lines. At the heart of the conflict were two distinct political and ethno-national groups: Catholics/nationalists/republicans, who largely identified as Irish and sought a united Ireland; and Protestants/unionists/loyalists, who identified as British and supported continued union with the United Kingdom. Though often labelled as a religious conflict, the division was political and territorial at its core, with religion functioning as a visible marker of belonging and difference (Barnes, 2005).

The partition of Ireland in 1921 formalized these divisions, creating the state of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom and leaving a substantial Catholic minority within a Protestant-dominated polity. Political power was concentrated in the hands of unionists, and systemic discrimination against Catholics was evident in housing allocation, employment, policing, and local governance. This period laid the groundwork for the civil rights movement that emerged in the late 1960s, when nationalist communities began to demand equality through peaceful protest. However, state and paramilitary responses to these demands quickly escalated into violence. The deployment of British troops in 1969, initially framed as a peacekeeping measure, soon became another source of conflict, particularly after events such as Bloody Sunday in 1972, when British soldiers shot and killed 14 unarmed protesters in Derry. In response, republican and loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) became more active, and Northern Ireland entered a prolonged period of politically motivated violence and civil unrest.

Although the conflict is popularly understood through a religious binary, scholars caution against oversimplifying it as a theological dispute. As Barnes (2005) argues, religion was primarily an ethno-political identifier rather than a causal factor. Protestant and Catholic affiliations indicated political allegiance (British or Irish) but the root causes of the conflict were grounded in issues of state legitimacy, national sovereignty, economic inequality, and cultural suppression. Religious identity thus acted as a shorthand for a much broader set of political and historical grievances, reflected in both institutional structures and everyday social interaction. These divisions were, and remain, spatially reinforced. Segregated neighbourhoods, peace walls, and separate education systems have all served to spatialize and perpetuate communal divisions.

The human toll of the conflict was substantial. More than 3,500 people were killed between 1969 and 1998, and tens of thousands more were injured or displaced. Children and young people were particularly affected by the normalization of violence and the physical and psychological consequences of growing up in divided, militarized communities. As Muldoon (2004) notes, over 250 children under the age of 17 were killed during the Troubles, and many more experienced chronic stress, trauma, and internalized sectarianism. The experience of political violence became deeply embedded in the social fabric, shaping individual development and reinforcing collective identities. The intergenerational impact of the conflict remains visible in Northern Ireland's persistent patterns of social and political segregation, even decades after the formal peace process began.

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 marked a turning point, establishing a power-sharing government, reforming policing, and recognizing the dual national identities of Northern Ireland's population. It also initiated processes of demilitarization, prisoner release, and cross-border cooperation with the Republic of Ireland. However, the agreement did not dissolve the structural or symbolic divides that defined the conflict. As both Muldoon (2004) and Barnes (2005) observe, peace has not been accompanied by full social integration. Most children still attend segregated schools, and many neighbourhoods remain defined by their ethno-political character. Peace walls still stand in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, often near the very murals and flags that continue to represent and reassert community identity and political allegiance.

These spatial and symbolic divisions form the essential backdrop for this thesis. The murals and flags that continue to dominate the urban landscape are not relics of a past conflict but active instruments of identity-making in a still-divided society. They commemorate, contest,

and project meanings of the Troubles while embedding them in new geopolitical frameworks, such as the Israel–Palestine conflict. Understanding their role in Northern Ireland’s post-conflict context requires an awareness of how the conflict emerged, evolved, and was contained.

### **3.2 The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Historical and Political Parallels**

Although unfolding in different regions, the conflicts in Northern Ireland and Israel–Palestine are frequently compared due to their shared legacies of colonial rule, contested national identities, partition, and prolonged violence. These parallels are not only recognized in academic literature but have been mobilized politically by both elites and grassroots actors to frame their struggles, justify positions, or build solidarity. In both cases, deeply embedded historical grievances and competing national claims have sustained cycles of mistrust, violence, and failed peace efforts across generations.

One of the most prominent parallels lies in the role of British imperialism in shaping both conflicts. Ireland was partitioned by Britain in 1921, while Palestine was divided under a 1947 UN plan following Britain’s withdrawal as the colonial power. Both partitions resulted in territorial divisions that institutionalized ethnic and national boundaries, intensifying rather than resolving existing tensions (Aveyard, 2023). The comparison of these historical partitions continues to resonate in political rhetoric today. As Aveyard (2023) shows, the analogy between Northern Ireland and Palestine was frequently evoked in Irish Republican media, such as *An Phoblacht*, to highlight perceived parallels in abandonment by allies, oppression under colonial legacies, and struggles for self-determination.

Both conflicts are also characterized by ethno-national and religious dimensions, with community identities closely tied to differing political aspirations. In Northern Ireland, the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community generally supports British rule, while the Catholic/Republican/Nationalist community aspires toward Irish reunification. Similarly, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is grounded in conflicting Jewish and Palestinian nationalisms, where land, security, and sovereignty are at the core of the dispute. As Paulin (2005) notes, cultural memory and identity are key battlegrounds in both societies, where public symbols, narratives, and commemorations become means of reinforcing collective identity and resisting perceived domination. These parallels highlight how deeply rooted national identity can

become a vehicle for both community cohesion and intergroup conflict, shaping how struggles for recognition are framed and sustained over time.

Moreover, both contexts involve asymmetrical power relations, with one side generally holding state power and the other functioning as a non-state or stateless actor. During the Troubles, the British state exercised considerable control over Northern Irish security and political life, particularly in nationalist areas. Similarly, Israel wields substantial military, legal, and administrative control over Palestinians in the occupied territories. Critics, including former Israeli officials like Michael Ben-Yair, have drawn comparisons between Israeli governance in the West Bank and apartheid regimes, emphasizing the existence of dual legal systems and deep inequalities (Paulin, 2005, p. 6). These imbalances reinforce narratives of victimhood and resistance within both marginalized communities, shaping how injustice and legitimacy are communicated domestically and internationally.

Another key similarity is the role of analogy and comparison itself as a political tool. According to Dudai (2022), analogies to Northern Ireland have become part of Israeli public discourse, used to promote peace initiatives, justify the status quo, or reject unfavourable comparisons. For example, peace activists and politicians have cited the Good Friday Agreement as a model of conflict resolution, suggesting that if Northern Ireland's conflict could be resolved, so too could the Israeli–Palestinian one. Meanwhile, opponents often reject such comparisons as misleading, emphasizing the differences in goals, scale, and identity between the groups involved (Dudai, 2022, pp. 286–287). Despite their contested nature, such analogies endure because they offer familiar frameworks for interpreting complex conflicts and allow actors to situate their positions within broader narratives of reconciliation or resistance.

These comparisons are not neutral. As Aveyard (2023) argues, connections between the IRA and the PLO were often exaggerated or politicized in British and Israeli media to serve a broader Cold War narrative about international terrorism. Nonetheless, the affective and rhetorical power of these analogies shaped political cultures in both places. In Northern Ireland, expressions of solidarity through mural painting and flag displays helped embed these analogies into the visual landscape. As Dudai (2022) highlights, these symbolic acts are not just reflections of political positions, they actively construct political meaning and identity by linking local struggles to global narratives. Ultimately, the persistence of these parallels reflects their utility as tools of political storytelling. Ones that allow communities to communicate

identity, assert legitimacy, and frame their conflicts in ways that resonate far beyond their borders.

In sum, the parallels between Northern Ireland and the Israel–Palestine conflict rest on shared legacies of colonial partition, enduring ethno-national division, and contested sovereignty. But beyond historical resemblance, the political function of these comparisons, like how and why they are mobilized, reveals much about how communities see themselves in the world. In the case of Northern Ireland, particularly among Republicans, these analogies are not just descriptive; they are identity-affirming and strategically mobilized to position the community within a wider, global struggle for justice and recognition.

## **4. Analysis**

This chapter presents the empirical analysis of murals and flags in Northern Ireland, using the visual discourse analysis framework outlined by Gillian Rose (2012) and situated within the broader theoretical perspectives of critical and popular geopolitics. The visual material collected by the author in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry and supplemented by a curated selection of flags from Dominic Bryan’s archive forms the basis of a comparative inquiry into how Republican and Unionist communities construct geopolitical narratives through public symbols. The analysis proceeds in three parts: first examining murals in Republican areas, then turning to murals and flags in Unionist areas, and finally comparing the two visual cultures. Each section draws on detailed examples to explore how solidarity with either Palestine or Israel is constructed through specific visual strategies, spatial contexts, and symbolic choices. The aim is not only to interpret these images as aesthetic or ideological expressions, but to understand how they function as geopolitical texts, which actively shape identity, memory, and territorial belonging in a post-conflict environment.

### **4.1 Visual and Symbolic Analysis of Catholic/Republican Murals**

This section examines how Republican murals express solidarity with the Palestinian cause through a rich visual language grounded in memory, resistance, and transnational identification. Drawing from the dataset collected in West Belfast and Derry, particularly the International Wall and Free Derry Corner, the analysis focuses on recurring visual motifs such as flags, martyrdom, and shared suffering. These murals operate not only as expressions of political identity but also as affective appeals that link local trauma to global injustice. Applying visual discourse analysis, this subchapter explores how Republican muralism

reinterprets the legacy of the Troubles in light of contemporary struggles in Palestine, constructing a symbolic continuity between Irish and Palestinian experiences of oppression and resistance.



Image 1: Mural near Bogside, Derry/Londonderry (Author's photograph, 2024).

The mural located in Bogside, Derry, serves as a visual representation of Irish republican solidarity with the Palestinian cause (see image 1). This piece, prominently featuring armed figures representing the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), encapsulates the deep-rooted political connections that have been constructed between these two movements. The explicit inclusion of their respective national symbols, the Palestinian and Irish flags, situates this mural within a broader narrative of transnational anti-colonial struggle.

The composition of the mural reinforces its message of unity and shared resistance. The two masked figures stand shoulder to shoulder, both in paramilitary gear, their bodies partially turned toward the viewer. One wears a Palestinian keffiyeh, a symbol long associated with Palestinian resistance, while the other dons a beret, a common feature in republican paramilitary imagery. Their body language suggests both fraternity and military cooperation, visually affirming a collective struggle against what both movements perceive as imperialist

forces. This solidarity is further emphasized by the presence of the red star between "PFLP" and "INLA," a universal emblem of leftist revolutionary movements.

This mural is particularly significant within the spatial and historical context of Bogside, a nationalist stronghold that has long been a site of resistance against British rule. Murals in this area frequently serve as political statements, and this piece continues that tradition by extending the scope of resistance beyond Ireland, linking it to conflicts with global impact. The decision to place the mural in a highly visible public space ensures that it functions as both a declaration of allegiance and a means of reinforcing collective memory. It tells a specific story where Irish republicans are not isolated in their struggle but part of an international movement against colonial oppression.



Image 2: The entrance to Bogside, Derry (Author's photograph, 2024).

At the centre of the mural is the enduring phrase: *"YOU ARE NOW ENTERING FREE DERRY"* (see image 2). Originally painted in 1969 during the Northern Ireland civil rights

movement, the phrase is now iconic, marking a physical and symbolic entry point into a space of resistance and community memory. The site of the mural, as emphasized by Rose's methodology, is essential to its meaning. The Free Derry wall is a known landmark of political identity and symbolic autonomy. Its use as a canvas for this particular message overlays contemporary international politics onto historical local resistance. It recasts Free Derry not only as a relic of the past but as a living node in a global network of solidarity. Below the phrase, the mural introduces visual elements that shift the focus from local struggle to international solidarity. To the left, a young Palestinian child wearing a keffiyeh gazes outward, signifying an emblem of both innocence and enduring defiance. In front of the child, a white dove carries a thorned flower from which blood drips, adding a layer of symbolic complexity. The dove as a traditional signifier of peace is not harmed itself, but the object it carries evokes the pain and cost associated with the pursuit of peace, particularly under conditions of occupation and violence.

At the mural's centre, the flags of Palestine and Ireland are shown interwoven, visually uniting the nationalist struggles of these communities. Beneath them is the phrase "*Resistance is not terrorism*", flanked by the Irish-language slogan "*Saoirse don Phalaistín*" (Freedom for Palestine). On the right stands a portrait of Motaz Azaiza, a young Palestinian photojournalist who became globally recognized for his frontline documentation of the Gaza war in 2023–24. His presence introduces a contemporary and humanitarian dimension to the mural. Rather than commemorating a martyr or militant, the mural honours a civilian figure. Through this composition, the mural aligns local republican identity with contemporary Palestinian resistance. It fuses historical iconography (such as the keffiyeh and the Free Derry slogan) with contemporary media imagery, embodied in Azaiza's presence. His inclusion is highly symbolic: he is not a militant or politician, but a witness. His camera became a weapon of visibility. Unlike traditional republican murals which often depict armed figures or martyrs, this mural uses a journalist as a moral anchor, suggesting that visibility, truth-telling, and digital resistance are forms of political engagement.

From a critical geopolitics perspective, this mural exemplifies the role of popular culture in shaping geopolitical knowledge. Rather than reflecting politics passively, it produces a geopolitical claim: that Derry's history of resistance aligns with today's global struggles for justice, particularly the Palestinian cause. The use of Motaz Azaiza, a figure intimately tied to the digital circulation of suffering and solidarity, suggests a transformation in how geopolitical

narratives are communicated. It bridges traditional street art with viral (social) media culture, underscoring the permeability between online and offline political imaginaries.



Image 3: A raised fist mural on Falls Road, Belfast (Author's photograph, 2024).

This mural, painted on a whitewashed wall along Belfast's Falls Road, aligns closely with the broader patterns of visual geopolitical messaging that characterize Irish republican muralism (see image 3). Using Gillian Rose's (2012) visual discourse analysis framework, particularly her first approach, which emphasizes the image's site, the complexity of its discourse, and the mechanisms by which it persuades viewers. This mural serves as a pointed expression of solidarity between the Irish republican cause and the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

The mural features three clenched fists in the colours of the Palestinian, Irish, and orange-white-green Irish tricolour flags. The fists are arranged in a row, overlapping slightly, and symbolically "linked" by a unifying posture and aesthetic. Accompanying the imagery are bold, capitalized statements: *"UNITED IN STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND*

*SOVEREIGNTY*”, followed by the Irish-language rallying cry “*Beir Bua!*” (literally, “Victory!”), and the hashtags #BDS and #FREEPALESTINE. BDS stands for Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions. It is a Palestinian-led movement that was launched in 2005 and stands for freedom, justice, and equality for Palestinians (What is BDS?, n.d). The inclusion of the website [www.32csm.org](http://www.32csm.org) roots the message in the specific political vision of the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, a hardline Irish republican organization opposed to British rule and aligned with radical forms of anti-colonial resistance.

The symbolism of the raised fist is critical here. It functions as a transnational signifier of resistance, widely used by revolutionary, anti-imperialist, and civil rights movements across the world. The semiotic layering of this symbol with the national flag colours of Palestine and Ireland reinforces the shared narrative of subjugation, struggle, and eventual liberation. The fists, rendered in a blocky, almost poster-like style, are visually arresting and easy to reproduce, which enhances their power as activist iconography.

From a critical geopolitics perspective, the mural does not merely reflect political sentiment; it actively constructs a geopolitical alliance. The image binds together two national movements within a framework of collective resistance against colonialism, foreign domination, and state violence. Moreover, the mural clearly engages in popular geopolitics, functioning as a form of grassroots political communication that bypasses institutional channels and speaks directly to the public via the urban environment.

The site of the mural on Falls Road amplifies its political resonance. This area has long been a stronghold of republican identity and working-class resistance, making it a natural space for public expressions of international solidarity. The wall’s highly visible placement on a main street ensures that the message is encountered regularly by both locals and visitors, naturalizing the alignment between Irish republicanism and Palestinian liberation.

The mural’s textual discourse, particularly the phrases “*United in struggle*” and “*For freedom and sovereignty*” makes a persuasive appeal grounded in moral clarity and shared suffering. It positions both Irish and Palestinian people as victims of colonial systems and presents resistance as not only justified, but necessary. The slogan “*Beir Bua!*” draws the Irish viewer into the affective charge of the message, emphasizing both historical continuity and emotional investment.

There is little contradiction within the mural's discourse; it presents a coherent and unequivocal political message. However, its complexity emerges in its visual and rhetorical interweaving of two distinct geopolitical contexts. The mural invites viewers to read the Irish experience of partition and occupation as structurally and morally comparable to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This equivalence is central to its political work, as it mobilizes memory and identity to foster empathy and political commitment beyond national borders.



Image 4: International wall in Belfast (Author's photograph, 2024).

Stretching across a long segment of the Falls Road Peace Wall in West Belfast, this mural sequence is one of the most visually and emotionally intricate expressions of Irish republican solidarity with Palestine (see image 4). The site carries heavy historical resonance. Originally constructed to divide Catholic and Protestant communities during the Troubles, the wall now serves as a repurposed space of artistic and political assertion.

Visually, the mural unfolds as a panoramic storyboard. It includes scenes of mourning, resistance, and endurance: grieving mothers, children running from explosions, families sheltering under tents, and images of both symbolic martyrdom and everyday life. A red ribbon weaves through the panels, connecting them with flowing text. The ribbon carries the lines of *"If I Must Die,"* a poem by the late Refaat Alareer, a Gazan poet, writer, and academic who was killed in an Israeli airstrike in December 2023. The poem, which begins with the words *"If I must die, you must live to tell my story..."*, articulates a deeply personal and collective yearning for remembrance, dignity, and freedom. Its presence elevates the mural from a symbolic gesture to a literary and emotional collaboration, bridging street art with poetry, resistance with mourning. Alareer's words guide the viewer's gaze and emotion across the mural, fusing imagery and text into a single discursive flow.

From a critical geopolitical lens, this mural not only represents political solidarity but enacts it. The inclusion of a contemporary poem by a Palestinian intellectual killed during the conflict imbues the wall with real-time urgency. Rather than depicting abstract ideals, the mural engages directly with current geopolitical violence and memorializes a specific figure who came to symbolize the human cost of occupation and resistance.

The visual semiotics at play intensify this reading. The red ribbon functions symbolically as a lifeline, maybe even a wound, and a thread of connection. The imagery of tents recalls the Nakba and continued displacement, while children, especially in juxtaposition with lines from Alareer's poem, symbolize both vulnerability and the promise of future survival. Colour also plays a key role: the bright oranges of sunset contrast with sombre greys and violent reds, generating a rhythm of despair and defiance.



Image 5: Mural on Peace Wall (Photograph courtesy of Eiki Berg, 2019)

Painted on the Peace Wall in West Belfast, this mural set from 2019 presents a direct political call to action alongside emotionally and symbolically charged imagery (see image 5). Viewed through Gillian Rose's visual discourse analysis, this mural becomes a site where geopolitical

grievance is rendered tangible through both institutional critique and intimate human suffering. The mural's rhetorical style, its choice of symbols, and its clear demands for state-level action exemplify the intersection of popular geopolitics and visual activism.

The mural on the left is structured as a textual manifesto, titled with the phrase "*Palestine 1917–Today*" and accompanied by a sequence of shrinking green silhouettes of Palestine, representing its territorial erosion over the past century. This timeline, often used in Palestinian solidarity campaigns, visually summarizes the impact of settler colonialism, occupation, and annexation. Below the maps, the mural issues a clear directive to the Irish government:

1. Officially recognize the state of Palestine.
2. Impose economic sanctions on Israel.
3. End all diplomatic ties with Israel.

The mural ends with a proclamation: "BOYCOTT ISRAEL - An Apartheid State", linking this appeal to the broader BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement.

Next to this, a second mural shows a man in a wheelchair, slingshot raised in defiance, with the background partially filled by the Palestinian flag: "Oppression Breeds Resistance." The man is painted mid-motion, actively engaged in resistance despite his disability. The mural also reads: "They took his land, his legs, and finally his life." This intense image is drawn from a real case. The man pictured is Ibrahim Abu Thuraya, who lost his legs in an airstrike in 2008 after raising a Palestinian flag along the border and was killed in 2017 during a protest in Jerusalem after U.S. President Donald Trump recognized the city as Israel's capital (Roberts, 2017). It serves as a visceral counterpart to the left-hand text, turning political abstraction into lived suffering and dignified resistance.

Together, these murals use a dual strategy of persuasion, as Gillian Rose (2012) would describe it: a visual-textual pairing where one panel communicates factual, institutional critique, and the other embodies the emotional and moral stakes of the issue. The mural thereby persuades through data and empathy, making a clear political case while also invoking symbolic resistance rooted in human dignity.

The visual semiotics of the wheelchair-bound figure are particularly striking. The man is not passive; despite being amputated, he is shown as actively resisting. This disrupts common tropes of victimhood, instead portraying Palestinians as agents who are resilient, determined,

and morally righteous. The slingshot in his hand becomes a symbol of asymmetric struggle, echoing the David and Goliath metaphor often invoked in popular representations of Palestine versus Israel.

From a critical geopolitical perspective, the mural asserts that international solidarity is not only ideological, but actionable. It links Irish political institutions directly to the issue, moving beyond cultural sympathy toward demands for diplomatic and economic alignment with Palestinian liberation. In this way, the mural shifts from representing geopolitics to doing geopolitics, which is a crucial function of popular geopolitical media.

The Falls Road Peace Wall itself is once again a key aspect of the image's site-specific power. Situated in a working-class, nationalist area with a deep history of resistance to state violence, the wall's very surface lends legitimacy to the message. It reflects a continuity of struggle: just as Irish republicans resisted British rule, the mural insists that Palestine must be supported in its resistance to Israeli occupation. This logic is made explicit not only through slogans but through the aesthetics of shared trauma: the disabled man, the call to boycott, the territorial loss.

There is little ambiguity or contradiction in the message. But the mural's complexity arises from its compositional method: a pairing of cold institutional critique with warm, tragic human imagery. This layering expands the discursive reach of the mural, making it legible to activists, politicians, and ordinary passersby alike.



Image 6: Two nations mural near Bogside, Derry (Author's photograph, 2024).

Painted on a residential wall in Derry, this mural visually encapsulates the essence of Irish republican-Palestinian solidarity in its most distilled form (see image 6). The composition is

stark and bold: a symmetrical juxtaposition of the Palestinian and Irish flags, connected through a shared colour palette and bisected by the phrase “*Two Nations, One Struggle.*” Centred is a stylized militant figure, black-faced, red-eyed, and red-mouthed, enclosed in a red triangle within a green circle. The mural’s clarity and symmetry invite an interpretation rooted in Gillian Rose’s (2012) first approach to visual discourse analysis, which emphasizes how imagery persuades through directness, repetition, and embedded ideological cues.

The power of this mural lies in its flat simplicity, a visual economy that makes its message unmistakable. There are no secondary scenes, no textual elaborations, no narrative sequencing. Just national colour blocks, a militant emblem, and a statement of ideological unity. In doing so, the mural functions as a visual slogan. It distils solidarity into a singular, almost propagandistic assertion of equivalence. There is no ambiguity: the struggle of Palestine and Ireland are seen not as similar, but as the same struggle. As two fronts of the same anti-colonial resistance.

From a critical geopolitical perspective, this mural actively constructs a transnational identity based on shared experiences of occupation, resistance, and nationalist aspiration. The use of flags transforms the mural from a general call for empathy into a direct articulation of political kinship. This is not solidarity based on sympathy. It is solidarity based on identification.

The central icon is a masked figure within a triangle and circle, which evokes paramilitary aesthetics. The mask, often associated with the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) or Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), also references Palestinian militant iconography. The design's symmetrical framing reinforces the ideological symmetry between the two nations. Through visual semiotics, the triangle can be read as a symbol of struggle (pointing upward, militant, red), and the circle as a symbol of unity and enclosure, suggesting a tight, self-contained revolutionary identity.

The lack of narrative detail, a mural without martyrs, civilians, or quotes, makes the mural ideologically rigid but functionally powerful. It does not seek to explain or persuade with nuance. Instead, it asserts: “this is the truth.” This aligns with Rose’s understanding that some images do not persuade through subtlety, but through symbolic repetition and certainty. In this way, the mural operates as a visual mantra, repeating a geopolitical conviction in the clearest possible terms.

### ***4.1.1 Representations of Palestinian Solidarity in Republican murals***

Across the Catholic and Republican areas of Belfast and Derry, murals play an essential role in expressing and solidifying transnational political identities. This chapter has examined how solidarity with Palestine is not merely expressed as abstract empathy, but is carefully constructed and visualized as a continuation of the Irish republican struggle. Through the strategic use of symbols, iconography, slogans, and the physical location of murals, Republican muralism asserts a deep alignment with the Palestinian cause. These representations are not spontaneous or superficial, they are discursively and visually layered acts of geopolitical narration.

As seen in the mural on the Bogside featuring armed fighters from the INLA and the PFLP, solidarity is represented through paramilitary symmetry. The imagery situates both movements within a shared framework of anti-imperial resistance. The use of similar poses, uniforms, and armament not only parallels the two struggles visually, but presents them as interchangeable actors in a global revolutionary narrative. The mural articulates solidarity through identification.

In contrast, the Free Derry wall mural draws upon affective imagery to elicit solidarity through moral clarity and emotional resonance. The inclusion of Motaz Azaiza, the dove carrying a bleeding thorned flower, and the tricolour interwoven with the Palestinian flag combine humanitarian symbolism with national struggle. This mural speaks to viewers not only as political agents, but as humans, encouraging solidarity rooted in empathy and contemporary urgency. Yet, its placement on Free Derry Corner ties it back to local history. It frames Gaza as today's Derry by recasting the Bogside's history of occupation, protest, and resistance within a global register. The Free Derry slogan, once directed at British state forces, is now visually extended to Israeli actions in Gaza. This visual and spatial continuity suggests that while the actors have changed, the dynamics of oppression and defiance remain. By symbolically transposing the Irish anti-colonial struggle onto Palestine, the mural collapses temporal and geographic distance, inviting viewers to see Gaza not as a distant conflict but as a continuation of Derry's legacy of resistance.

The Falls Road Peace Wall mural, with Refaat Alareer's poem "*If I Must Die*" painted across a red ribbon, represents perhaps the most extensive and deliberate narrative arc. It uses a multi-panel format to tell a visual story of Palestinian loss, resistance, survival, and dignity. Here,

solidarity is not asserted through slogans or symbols alone, it is *felt* through storytelling. The red ribbon's poetic flow, combined with scenes of displacement, funeral processions, and youth resistance, aligns with Gillian Rose's (2012) idea of persuasive visual discourse: it builds familiarity, rhythm, and moral truth through emotionally layered imagery.

Other murals, such as the wheelchair-bound protester raising a slingshot beneath the slogan "*Oppression Breeds Resistance*", reinforce this idea of visual identification. The mural transforms disability into defiance and casts individual loss as collective strength. The adjacent mural's call for boycott, sanctions, and the recognition of Palestine connects visual protest to concrete political demand, showing how murals function as tools of activism, not just representation.

Finally, the mural declaring "Two Nations, One Struggle" distils the entire discourse into a flat and potent slogan. With the Palestinian and Irish flags mirroring each other and a militant emblem at the centre, the mural asserts a pure ideological symmetry. There is no narrative, no personalization – just a visual formula. It is solidarity reduced to its ideological core, and in doing so, it reinforces the pervasiveness of this geopolitical identification across Republican mural culture.

Together, these murals illustrate how Irish Republican areas use public visual culture to position themselves within a global framework of anti-colonial resistance. The representation of Palestinian solidarity is not static. It ranges from the poetic to the militant, the affective to the directive. But across all forms, one message endures: Palestinian liberation is not separate from Irish liberation, it is part of the same struggle.

## **4.2 Visual and Symbolic Analysis of Protestant/Unionist Murals**

In contrast to the emotionally and narratively rich mural tradition of Republican areas, Unionist expressions of geopolitical alignment, particularly with Israel, are most often found in flag displays. This subchapter explores the symbolic logic of Loyalist flags and the rare examples of pro-Israel murals, drawing on photographic data from Dominic Bryan's archive and author fieldwork in Shankill and other Unionist areas. These visual artifacts emphasize ideological affinity and religious kinship, often referencing biblical prophecy and imperial legacy rather than shared struggle or victimhood. Through emblematic design and strategic spatial placement, Unionist flags articulate a visual discourse of sovereignty, identity, and defensive

pride. This analysis investigates how such symbols function within the Loyalist visual tradition to assert geopolitical belonging and ideological solidarity in a post-conflict context.



Image 7: Mural between Shankill and Falls Roads (Photograph courtesy of Carlos Kleimann, 2024).

Located near the interface between the Shankill and Falls Roads, this mural represents a unique and deliberate expression of Loyalist identification with Israel (see image 7). It centres on Lt. Colonel John Henry Patterson, an Anglo-Irish soldier and writer who later became a prominent supporter of Zionist military causes. Uniquely, this mural does not just imply ideological alignment. Instead it narrates and historicizes it, visually enshrining Patterson as a bridge figure between Unionism, British imperial service, and the Zionist movement.

The mural consists of six narrative panels, each accompanied by photographs, illustrations, and military insignia. These sections trace Patterson’s journey from the Tsavo railway expedition (notably fighting man-eating lions) through his service in the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), his military career in World War I, and finally his leadership in the Jewish Legion, the Zionist military unit that fought with the British in Palestine.

A large star of David is underwritten with words from Netanyahu: “In all of Jewish history we have never had a Christian friend as understanding and devoted.” This quote elevates Patterson from respected figure to near-prophetic ally, and by extension, casts the Loyalist community as Patterson’s heirs. He is seen as understanding, devoted, and ideologically aligned with modern Israel. The mural thus positions Zionist support not as a political stance but as an inherited obligation, sealed by friendship, military service, and religious affinity.

Through the lens of critical geopolitics, this mural can be read as a performative assertion of imperial brotherhood and sacred alliance. It reframes Loyalism as a community not just aligned with British identity but with the global defence of Judeo-Christian civilization, a narrative often mobilized by Zionist and Christian Zionist rhetoric alike. The mural locates Patterson, and therefore Loyalist identity, at the intersection of militarism, Protestant heritage, and Zionist legitimacy.

Visual semiotics further supports this interpretation. The use of the Star of David alongside the Union Jack, the Red Hand of Ulster, and British military uniforms visually merges Zionism with Ulster unionism. The discursive message is clear: these are not separate struggles but parallel moral missions underwritten by divine right, national defence, and historical righteousness.



Image 8: Flag with two lions (Photograph courtesy of Dominic Bryan, n.d.)

This customized flag, combining Unionist, British, and Zionist symbols, is an example of how Loyalist communities in Northern Ireland express geopolitical identification not through overt murals but through visual hybrids that draw on religious, national, and imperial iconography (see image 8). Using Gillian Rose's (2012) visual discourse analysis by focusing on site, visual codes, and ideological function, this flag communicates solidarity with Israel in a way that reflects the theological underpinnings and imperial worldview often associated with hardline Loyalism.

At first glance, the flag is a fusion of multiple visual systems. The base layer is the Ulster Banner-style cross, referencing Northern Ireland's historic flag. At the centre is a blue Star of David, containing the Red Hand of Ulster, a potent Loyalist symbol of identity and legacy. The Red Hand functions here as a claim of ethnic continuity and divine right, literally placed inside the symbol of Zionism, suggesting an inherited kinship with the biblical Israelites. Above this, a British crown reinforces monarchical allegiance and Protestant-British unity.

Flanking the Star of David are two lions, one blue, one red, evoking both the Lion of Judah (a traditional Zionist and biblical symbol) and heraldic British imagery. The blue and red colour division may symbolize political unity between Unionist factions (such as the DUP and UUP), or more broadly, the blending of British and Israeli statehood narratives. Below the lions are scriptural references:

- Ezekiel 28:25 – “When I gather the people of Israel from the nations... then they will live in their own land.”
- Genesis 49:8–12 – A prophecy concerning Judah, associated with kingship and the messianic line.

These verses, situated at the base of the flag like a foundation, turn the entire visual composition into a political theology as a sacred justification for both Israeli nationhood and Ulster Loyalism.

From a critical geopolitical perspective, the flag becomes a medium of what we might call imperial-geopolitical mirroring. It visually positions Unionist Northern Ireland and Israel as righteous, embattled frontiers of Western civilization. Minority states defending identity and sovereignty against external (often imagined) threats. In this worldview, both Unionists and Zionists are seen as chosen people, upholding divine covenants in hostile territories.

What is key here is not just what is present but how it is arranged: the Red Hand *inside* the Star of David visually fuses the two identities, suggesting that Loyalists see themselves not merely as supporters of Israel, but as parallel or kin communities. This logic reflects a deeper biblical-providential reading of geopolitics, where divine sanction underpins political alignment.

Rose's notion of visual discourse as persuasive is reflected in how this flag naturalizes political ideology through symbolic order and theological citation. It encourages viewers (likely

members of Loyalist communities familiar with both the Red Hand and biblical texts) to read the image as *truth*, not *argument*.

The absence of lived or contemporary references is as revealing as the symbols themselves. Unlike Republican murals, which incorporate imagery of suffering, resistance, or martyrdom, this flag avoids conflict or moral complexity. It is an assertion, not a debate. There is no victimhood narrative. There is only legitimacy, divine right, and strength.



Image 9: British-Zionist Composite Flag (Photograph courtesy of Dominic Bryan, n.d.)

This customized flag combines the Union Jack with the national emblem of Israel, presenting a synthesis of British and Zionist symbolism (see image 9). On the left side, the Union Jack functions as a foundational marker of Loyalist identity, affirming continued allegiance to the United Kingdom. On the right, the Israeli emblem which features a seven-branched menorah flanked by olive branches and placed above a stylized pedestal, evokes religious tradition, national sovereignty, and statehood. The Hebrew text at the bottom spells "Israel," completing the symbolic link.

From a visual discourse perspective, the flag operates as a clear statement of geopolitical alignment and spiritual kinship. Unlike generic displays of the Israeli national flag, this composite design suggests a deeper synthesis. One that fuses national identities rather than simply juxtaposing them. The menorah is a profoundly religious symbol, tied to Jewish heritage

and biblical legitimacy, and its use here signals a Loyalist engagement with religious-nationalist narratives. This supports Bryan's (2018) argument that Loyalist identification with Israel is not merely reactive to Republican support for Palestine, but also tied to evangelical and dispensationalist Protestant beliefs in Israel's divine status as the biblical homeland. The inclusion of a state emblem rather than a religious or military flag further emphasizes Israel's legitimacy as a modern, sovereign, and divinely-ordained state, paralleling how many Loyalists view Northern Ireland's place within the UK.

The physical construction of the flag also matters. It is clearly a synthetic, mass-produced item, reflecting the material culture of flag politics that Bryan (2018) and Nolan & Bryan (2014, 2016) describe. Its existence speaks to a culture of symbolic consumption in Loyalist communities, where flags are not just political expressions, but visual commodities used to claim space and articulate identity. The flag's hybrid format shows how international alliances are not just imagined but materialized in everyday space, contributing to the spatial politics of interface areas and contested neighbourhoods.

Importantly, this flag visually collapses complex geopolitical narratives into a binary of alignment: Loyalist-British-Protestant solidarity with Israeli-Jewish sovereignty. In this way, it mirrors the visual strategies seen in Republican murals that align Irish nationalism with Palestinian resistance. However, where Republican imagery tends to be narrative and affective, this Loyalist example is more emblematic, offering a heraldic assertion of power, legitimacy, and divine right. Rather than referencing history or struggle directly, it projects ideological clarity and righteousness through symbols of permanence and order.

In sum, this flag is a powerful piece of visual geopolitics. It materializes a fusion of statehood, religion, and imperial loyalty, reinforcing Loyalist identity not only in opposition to Irish nationalism but in spiritual and symbolic alignment with Israel. As such, it contributes to the ongoing visual performance of sectarian and geopolitical boundaries in Northern Ireland's post-conflict environment.



Image 10: Loyalist Flag with Star of David and Ulster Symbols (Photograph courtesy of Dominic Bryan, n.d.)

This customized flag combines several visual elements to articulate a distinct Loyalist identity aligned with both British imperial tradition and Zionist solidarity (see image 10). At the centre lies a large blue Star of David, within which is placed the Red Hand of Ulster, which is a long-standing emblem of Northern Irish Protestant and Loyalist heritage. Above the star sits a British crown, while on either side are two heraldic red lions, symbols associated with strength, royalty, and Ulster unionism. The crown and lions reaffirm allegiance to the British monarchy and imperial legacy, invoking traditional Loyalist values of loyalty, strength, and continuity. These symbols anchor the flag in the past, connecting current geopolitical affiliations with a broader historical arc of Protestant British identity. The juxtaposition of these with the Israeli reference projects a sense of righteous struggle, of being on the “right side” of both history and divine order. As Bryan (2018) has observed, such displays draw upon Protestant fundamentalist readings of scripture, where support for Israel is not merely political but eschatological. Israel becomes a necessary and sacred ally in the defence of Christian civilization.

The golden harp at the bottom of the flag is particularly notable. While the harp is often associated with Irish nationalism in modern usage, this specific version, known as the “maid of Erin” or maiden harp, has roots in the Kingdom of Ireland’s official flag, used between 1542 and 1800 when Ireland functioned as a dependent territory under the English Crown. Its inclusion here likely serves to reassert Loyalist claims to Irishness, but crucially, it does so through a colonial lens by referencing a version of Ireland that was firmly integrated into

British rule. Rather than signalling Irish identity in a republican sense, the harp here functions as a symbol of dominion, expressing a Loyalist view of Ireland as historically and rightfully bound to Britain. In this way, the flag subtly reclaims Irish imagery while rejecting Irish sovereignty, echoing how Loyalist murals and symbols often appropriate cultural elements to reframe the island's history through a unionist worldview.

Materially, the flag is synthetic and mass-produced, echoing Bryan's (2018) description of how flag culture in Northern Ireland is increasingly commodified. Its portability and affordability mean it can be widely displayed in Loyalist neighbourhoods, functioning both as a symbol of group identity and a claim over space. These symbols are often used not only to affirm internal cohesion but also to mark territory in interface areas or mixed communities. In this sense, the flag operates within what Nolan and Bryan (2014, 2016) call a symbolic conflict—a contest not only over memory and legitimacy, but over visibility and permanence in the urban environment.

In sum, this flag condenses centuries of imperial, biblical, and political narratives into a single visual field. It does not simply reflect Loyalist identity but actively constructs it as morally righteous, imperially aligned, and geopolitically connected. Through this layered symbology, the flag expresses a vision of Loyalism that is global in scope but locally grounded, asserting that Northern Irish Protestants are not alone in their struggle, but part of a wider divine and historical order.



Image 11: Loyalist Flag with Star of David and Red Fist in Lower Shankill. (Photograph courtesy of Dominic Bryan, 2007)

The customized flag at the centre of this image is a significant piece of visual discourse (see image 11). It imitates the format of the Israeli national flag (white field, blue Star of David, and horizontal blue bars) but replaces the central emblem with a red clenched fist, a longstanding Loyalist symbol of resistance and defiance. This flag functions as a localized reimagining of the Israeli national symbol, adapting it into a distinctly Loyalist idiom. While the Israeli flag is typically interpreted as a symbol of Jewish sovereignty and survival, this version overlays it with a symbol rooted in Loyalist political history, reframing it as a shared narrative of struggle, loyalty, and militancy.

The clenched fist has been a key visual trope in Loyalist murals and paramilitary iconography, particularly associated with groups like the Red Hand Commando and the broader Ulster resistance tradition. Its placement inside the Star of David in this flag suggests not just solidarity with Israel but a fusion of identities. The Loyalist struggle becomes visually embedded within Israel's broader narrative. This is not a generic display of support, but a symbolic statement that these two causes are connected at their ideological and emotional cores. The flag draws on a transnational identification with Israel as a militarized, embattled, and righteous state, which is a framing reinforced by Loyalist readings of biblical history and Protestant evangelical theology (Bryan, 2018).

#### ***4.2.1 Representations of Israeli Solidarity in Loyalist murals and flags***

Loyalist expressions of solidarity with Israel are characterized by emblematic clarity, theological underpinnings, and a historical framing that ties their political identity to both imperial British heritage and contemporary geopolitical alliances. The single mural uncovered during fieldwork featuring John Henry Patterson offers a rare but revealing window into how this solidarity is constructed. Patterson's life story, which intertwines British imperial service with Zionist military organization, is used to cast Loyalism not only as historically aligned with Israel, but as its spiritual and military ally. The mural's deployment of symbols like British uniforms, the Ulster Volunteer Force insignia, and a prominently displayed Star of David, constructs a narrative of shared struggle. This alignment is further reinforced by the Netanyahu quote praising Patterson as "a Christian friend as understanding and devoted," positioning the Loyalist community as a moral and historical continuation of this legacy.

This message is echoed across a broader and more prolific visual discourse: customized flags. These items, often displayed in interface areas or mounted on lamp posts, act as portable

murals. They are compact, replicable, and equally potent in symbolic meaning. The flags pair Loyalist and Israeli imagery in multiple configurations: the Star of David enclosing the Red Hand of Ulster, flanked by crowned lions and biblical verses; or the menorah from Israel's national emblem placed alongside the Union Jack. These visual hybrids are not just decorative, they construct a theological geography in which Loyalists and Zionists are both imagined as chosen, embattled peoples upholding Judeo-Christian civilization. The use of scriptural citations, such as Ezekiel 28:25 and Genesis 49:8–12, reinforces this sacred-political worldview, casting modern geopolitical alignment as foretold in prophecy.

As Bryan (2018) argues, the display of Israeli symbols in Loyalist areas is not solely reactive to Republican support for Palestine. Rather, it reflects deeper ideological and religious convictions embedded in strands of evangelical Protestantism. In these communities, Israel is more than a nation, it is a theological anchor and a symbol of divine legitimacy. These views are further materialized in mass-produced flags that blend religious motifs with imperial insignia, revealing how commercial flag culture becomes a medium through which global political narratives are localized and spiritualized. The Loyalist flag with the Red Hand of Ulster superimposed on the Israeli flag (Lower Shankill, 2007) demonstrates this synthesis particularly well. Here, the Israeli format is preserved, but its core is filled with a clenched red fist, transforming the symbol of Jewish sovereignty into one of Loyalist defiance. The substitution is not a dilution but a fusion, a visual statement that Loyalist resistance and Israeli sovereignty are linked not only politically, but symbolically and morally.

This trend of symbolic convergence is further evidenced by the presence of flags featuring the Israeli emblem of the menorah combined with the Union Jack, or the inclusion of the maiden harp, a symbol of the pre-1801 Kingdom of Ireland, within Israeli-Loyalist flag arrangements. These artifacts map a vision of Loyalist history that predates the modern Irish nationalist movement and recasts Irishness through a Loyalist-British-Israeli lens. Such symbols, as Nolan and Bryan (2014, 2016) emphasize, function as tools of territorial inscription. When flown in contested neighbourhoods, they are not just displays of allegiance, but acts of spatial claim and symbolic dominance.

Taken together, the mural of Patterson and the flags analysed construct a coherent visual discourse of Loyalist-Zionist solidarity. They draw on imperial history, Protestant theology, and the aesthetics of power to narrate a geopolitical alignment rooted in shared identity, divine mission, and historical parallel. This differs markedly from the Republican embrace of

Palestine, which is often narrated through empathy, resistance, and anti-colonial kinship. Loyalist expressions, by contrast, are assertive, orderly, and sacred. They reflect a worldview in which solidarity with Israel is not a political stance but a theological destiny, one that affirms Loyalist legitimacy and reasserts their place within both the British state and a broader Judeo-Christian moral order.

### **4.3 Comparative Analysis of Republican and Unionist Murals**

The visual materials collected for this thesis reveal a clear divergence in how Republican and Unionist communities in Northern Ireland engage with the Israel–Palestine conflict through public symbols. The most consistent pattern is that Republican expressions of solidarity are articulated primarily through murals, while Unionist expressions appear predominantly in the form of flags.

The murals in Republican areas are often highly narrative, visually rich, and politically direct. For instance, the mural on Free Derry Corner includes the image of Motaz Azaiza, a dove carrying a bleeding flower, and the tricolour merged with the Palestinian flag. This mural connects the Palestinian struggle with Irish Republican memory through both humanistic and nationalist symbolism. Its placement on a historically significant wall ties Gaza to the Bogside, framing Palestinian resistance as a contemporary mirror of Derry’s past. Similarly, murals along the International Wall on Falls Road emphasize themes of vulnerability, injustice, and defiance. These images communicate a clear affective message of solidarity rooted in shared experiences of occupation, resistance, and sacrifice.

Across these examples, the Republican murals repeatedly foreground narratives of anti-colonialism, victimhood, and moral legitimacy. Their symbolic strategies include explicit references to British imperialism and Israeli militarism, presenting these as parallel systems of oppression. They also frequently incorporate poetic or political texts, such as Refaat Alareer’s “If I Must Die,” which appeared in the form of a bleeding ribbon across a mural. The murals function not only as commemorative devices but as visual arguments, appealing for international solidarity by aligning Irish nationalism with Palestinian liberation.

On the Unionist side, support for Israel is expressed almost entirely through customized flags. These range from Israeli national flags flown alongside the Union Jack to hybrid symbols, such as a Star of David containing the Red Hand of Ulster or the British crown flanked by menorahs

and lions. One flag analysed in Shankill, for example, uses the colour scheme of the Israeli flag but replaces its central Star of David with a clenched red fist, which is a symbol of Loyalist resistance. Another combines the Israeli menorah with the Union Jack and biblical references from Genesis and Ezekiel, visually aligning Loyalist identity with Judeo-Christian prophecy and divine favour. These flags present Israel not as a partner in shared struggle, but as a symbol of strength, legitimacy, and spiritual kinship.

Unlike the Republican murals, the Unionist flags rarely invoke victimhood or emotional solidarity. Instead, they convey ideological affinity and defensive pride. Their visual rhetoric is more emblematic than narrative, more declarative than empathetic. The John Henry Patterson mural, the only Loyalist murals referencing Israel used in the thesis, also follows this pattern. Rather than drawing a direct comparison between the Israeli and Northern Irish contexts, it honours Patterson as a historical bridge figure, reinforcing Loyalist identity through imperial and biblical association.

Taken together, these findings show a clear divide in both the form and logic of transnational visual solidarity. Republican murals appeal to emotion, historical parallel, and political resistance, whereas Unionist flags signal religious alignment, sovereignty, and cultural defence. Both, however, serve a territorial function. Whether painted on walls or flown from lamp posts, these symbols assert identity in public space and inscribe each community's geopolitical position into the physical landscape of the post-conflict city.

## **5. Discussion and Interpretation of Findings**

The findings from the previous chapter underscore how murals and flags operate not merely as expressions of political views, but as discursive practices embedded within post-conflict spatial politics. This chapter brings together the findings from the preceding visual analyses to answer the central research questions and reflect on the theoretical implications of the thesis. While Chapter 4 focused on the specific content and structure of these murals and flags, this chapter turns to broader interpretation. It considers how these visual forms interact with questions of symbolic power, geopolitical alignment, and post-conflict identity.

One of the most significant findings is how both communities use visual culture to maintain and reframe symbolic boundaries in a society formally at peace but still socially divided. Murals and flags are not passive decorations but active instruments of spatial and ideological

control. This is most evident in their placement: Republican murals dominate key sites of historical resistance (e.g., Free Derry Corner, the International Wall), while Unionist flags often cluster along main roads, lamp posts, and interface zones. These visual markers perform what Simon Harrison (1995) calls a “proprietary contest,” using symbols to assert ownership over contested space and to articulate identity in opposition to an “other.” In this sense, post-conflict Belfast and Derry/Londonderry remain mapped by visual practices that continue to mark and reinforce sectarian division.

The visual material collected and analysed reveals that both Republican and Unionist communities engage with the Israel–Palestine conflict as a means of projecting and reinforcing their own political identities, but they do so in fundamentally different ways. The different modalities of expression (murals for Republicans, flags for Unionists) reflect not only aesthetic preferences but deep-rooted cultural and political logics.

Republican murals express solidarity with Palestine through affective, narrative-driven imagery. They draw on a shared history of colonization, resistance, and injustice, often using symbols such as barbed wire, the keffiyeh, and direct portrayals of Palestinian figures like Motaz Azaiza and Ibrahim Abu Thuraya. These visuals function as moral appeals and ideological statements, positioning the Republican community within a global framework of liberation movements. They are spatially fixed but symbolically expansive, rooted in Irish political history while pointing outward toward international struggles.

This strategy is particularly evident in murals located on the International Wall, where solidarity with Palestine is often framed through moral and historical parallels. For example, the mural featuring the poem “If I Must Die” by Palestinian writer Refaat Alareer transforms a visual space of Republican resistance into a transnational site of mourning and defiance. Similar is the use of Motaz Azaiza on a mural in Derry. Its placement on Free Derry Corner further localizes this global connection, visually linking the siege of Gaza to the historical siege of the Bogside, and by extension, aligning the moral authority of the Palestinian cause with the legacy of Irish resistance. As Crowley (2022) argues, Republican muralism has always included an external focus, but in the post-conflict era, it has matured into a conscious visual archive of international solidarity where memory, resistance, and transnational identity are tightly interwoven.

Unionist communities, in contrast, express solidarity with Israel almost exclusively through flags. These flags display Israeli symbols such as the Star of David, menorah, and biblical scripture often integrated with the Red Hand of Ulster, Union Jack, or Protestant religious iconography. This form of visual expression emphasizes ideological and spiritual kinship, aligning Unionist identity with Israel not through a shared history of marginalization, but through notions of biblical prophecy, sovereignty, and civilizational defence. As Bryan (2018) notes, this connection is rooted in a worldview that sees Israel as a fellow bastion of Judeo-Christian tradition, under siege by hostile forces. One flag analysed in this study superimposes the Red Hand of Ulster within a Star of David on a blue-and-white field, mirroring the Israeli flag but visually integrating the two identities. Another combines the menorah with British crowns and heraldic lions, producing a striking symbol of imperial and theological alignment.

These visual expressions reveal how post-conflict identity in Northern Ireland remains entangled in global symbolic struggles. Murals and flags are not merely decorative or commemorative. They function as everyday geopolitical statements, materializing transnational allegiances and inscribing them into the urban landscape. In Republican areas, the imagery draws from traditions of resistance, grief, and internationalism, casting the community as part of a broader struggle against imperialism. In Unionist areas, the visuals invoke strength, legitimacy, and chosen status, casting the community as aligned with global forces of order and sovereignty. Together, they demonstrate that while the violence of the Troubles has receded, the symbolic battle over identity and global positioning continues, rendered in public space through paint, fabric, and the politics of visibility.

The data shows that murals and flags in both communities operate as dynamic forms of public memory and political identity. Murals in Republican areas commemorate the legacy of the Troubles while simultaneously aligning with new global struggles, allowing for continuity and rearticulation of identity. In Crowley's (2022) words, Republican murals "reach the future through the past," transforming localized trauma into a shared narrative of international resistance. This is particularly evident in the mural on Free Derry Corner featuring the image of Motaz Azaiza. The inclusion of this alongside the bleeding thorned flower and the interwoven Palestinian and Irish tricolours, constructs a deeply affective space of remembrance and solidarity. The mural links the memory of state violence in the Bogside with present-day suffering in Gaza, effectively fusing historical trauma with contemporary geopolitical empathy.

This layering of memory is further seen on the International Wall, where murals frequently incorporate past Republican figures or events such as the 1981 hunger strikes, while simultaneously referencing global movements like the Palestinian struggles. These sites function as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), where physical space is transformed into a repository of collective identity. The act of continually repainting and updating these murals sustains their relevance, allowing Republican communities to maintain a sense of ideological continuity even as the geopolitical landscape evolves.

In Unionist communities, flags function in a parallel but distinct way. Though less narratively detailed, their symbolic presence reinforces ideological boundaries and serves as a continuous marker of identity and allegiance. As the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition (2021) reports, flags are increasingly displayed throughout the year and not just during commemorative periods. This visual saturation of space acts as a form of territorial inscription, asserting Unionist identity in both everyday life and contested zones. The display of Israeli flags, in particular, adds a layer of symbolic alignment that extends beyond local politics. In the example of the British Zionist flag displayed alongside the Union Jack, and the customized banners referencing biblical scripture, Unionist identity is projected through a fusion of cultural, religious, and geopolitical symbols. These flags do not reference personal or community suffering in the same way as Republican murals, but they perform a memory function of a different kind: they reinforce a narrative of cultural defence, moral righteousness, and alignment with global power structures perceived to reflect Unionist values.

This difference in tone and structure reflects deeper contrasts in how memory and identity are politically mobilized in the two communities. Republican visual culture tends to humanize and historicize its subjects, often portraying victims, martyrs, or children as emotionally resonant figures. Unionist flags, by contrast, favour symbolic abstraction like Stars of David, fists, crowns, and biblical references, projecting stability and divine legitimacy rather than emotional vulnerability. Yet both forms serve to reinscribe communal boundaries and ensure that the post-conflict identity of each group remains both visible and spatially anchored.

The findings of the analysis also show that the divergence of Republicans using murals and Unionists using flags is both practical and symbolic. On the Republican side, muralism has long been a strategic form of political communication, particularly since the 1981 Hunger Strikes. As Crowley (2022) notes, Republican murals were historically used to counter censorship and reach external audiences. Their contemporary focus on internationalism is a

continuation of that tradition, now visually consolidated on the International Wall. For Unionist communities, by contrast, the alignment with Israel emerges in a symbolic environment where murals remain locally focused, and flags serve as faster, cheaper, and more flexible tools of symbolic alignment (Bryan, 2018). The lack of pro-Israel mural content is not accidental but reflects a different visual culture. One that privileges symbols over narrative and permanence over persuasion.

This contrast is further supported by the mural archive studied by Crowley and colleagues (2022), which includes over 15,000 images but contains no examples of Loyalist murals referencing Israel, whereas Republican murals frequently feature Palestine, Latin America, and other struggles. Republican muralism engages in what Crowley describes as “vernacular archiving,” using wall space to record and renew international alliances. The International Wall exemplifies this approach: it is updated regularly and intentionally curated to reflect ongoing geopolitical concerns, including recent portrayals of Gaza and Palestinian resistance figures such as Motaz Azaiza and Ibrahim Abu Thuraya. These murals are narrative and commemorative, drawing moral and political parallels between Irish and Palestinian experiences of occupation. In contrast, Unionist muralism remains primarily inward-looking, often focused on loyalist paramilitary history, British military commemorations, and local martyrdom. As a result, it is flags, not murals, that have become the preferred visual medium for expressing international alignment. As Bryan and Nolan (2016) argue, flags in Loyalist communities are increasingly used to mark space and assert identity, often remaining in place long after commemorative events. Customized flags incorporating the Star of David, menorah, and biblical references visually align Loyalism with Israel through theological kinship and ideological assertion, not through emotional narrative or shared suffering. This divergence reflects not just a difference in form, but a deeper variation in how each community conceptualizes and performs geopolitical solidarity.

The findings reveal that while both communities in Northern Ireland draw on the Israel–Palestine conflict as a symbolic lens for expressing geopolitical affiliation, they do so through distinct visual forms, aesthetic logics, and political narratives. These differences are not merely stylistic, as they reflect deeper variations in how each community constructs identity, interprets history, and claims space.

Republican murals are emotive, narrative-driven, and rooted in historical continuity. They use visual storytelling to construct parallels between the Irish Republican struggle and global anti-

colonial movements, particularly that of Palestine. Murals like the one on Free Derry Corner juxtapose symbols of Irish resistance with those of Palestinian suffering, linking the memory of British state violence in Northern Ireland with contemporary Israeli military actions in Gaza. Through visual elements such as barbed wire, children under occupation, or solidarity slogans painted on walls, Republican murals offer a persuasive moral argument: that Ireland and Palestine share a common history of oppression and resistance. This identification is not only symbolic but emotionally charged, inviting viewers to connect with the imagery on a deeply human level. In doing so, these murals actively reshape local memory through global solidarity.

Unionist expressions, by contrast, are emblematic, static, and theological in their visual language. Flags displayed in Protestant areas rarely feature human figures or narrative sequences. Instead, they rely on dense symbolic combinations as mentioned before. These images assert identity rather than seek empathy. The Israeli flag, for instance, does not evoke shared suffering but serves as a marker of cultural and religious alignment, positioning the Unionist community alongside Israel as a perceived bastion of sovereignty, statehood, and Judeo-Christian civilization. Rather than inviting connection through shared oppression, these displays fortify symbolic borders, affirming community boundaries through global identification with power and permanence.

Despite these differences, both communities engage in the same geopolitical practice: they use visual forms to connect local identity to global narratives. Whether painted as murals or flown as flags, these images transform the physical landscape into a symbolic one where political meaning is territorialized, and identity is rendered visible. In both cases, the Israel–Palestine conflict serves not only as a distant international issue but as a reflective mirror, through which Northern Irish communities articulate their values, fears, and aspirations. These visual alignments also provide a framework for interpreting contemporary political developments, offering shorthand references to moral legitimacy, historical grievance, or civilizational struggle.

The key difference, then, lies in the visual strategies and ideological orientations adopted by each community. Republicans use murals to humanize their cause, drawing from anti-imperialist traditions and creating internationalist narratives of resistance and empathy. Unionists deploy flags to signal continuity, invoking biblical legitimacy and cultural cohesion in the face of perceived political marginalization. These divergent strategies suggest different

relationships to the past and different visions for the future. One outward-facing and solidaristic, the other inward-defensive and declarative.

What emerges from these visual practices is not a movement toward shared memory or mutual recognition, but rather a visual reinforcement of boundaries. As Crowley (2022) notes, Republican muralism continues to produce and preserve community-specific narratives, while Loyalist visual culture functions as an assertion of presence and exclusion, particularly in flag form. Both mediums, in their own ways, mark territory, uphold communal narratives, and sustain the visual language of division. While they may reflect a shift from paramilitary to symbolic conflict, they nevertheless illustrate how visual culture plays a central role in reproducing post-conflict identities and reinforcing the spatial and ideological separations that persist long after formal violence has ended.

These divergent visual cultures also reflect deeper differences in each community's historical relationship to the state, religion, and the concept of internationalism. Republican muralism has a legacy of circumventing censorship, creating alternative channels for communication with both local and international audiences. Loyalist reliance on flags, meanwhile, reflects a theological-political worldview rooted in the legitimacy of the British state and the divine order. This difference in visual strategy speaks not only to aesthetic preference but to distinct political imaginations. Interpreted through the lens of critical and popular geopolitics, these visual expressions are not just reflections of political culture: they are constitutive of it. They participate in what Klaus Dodds (2007) describes as the everyday performance of geopolitical meaning, where spatial texts like murals and flags shape how communities imagine themselves in relation to global struggles. The affective pull of Republican murals and the declarative power of Unionist flags both work to inscribe post-conflict identity within a transnational frame. These images do more than communicate. They align, separate, and project.

## Conclusions

This thesis set out to investigate how murals and flags in Northern Ireland visually express solidarity with the Israel–Palestine conflict, and what these expressions reveal about post-conflict identity, memory, and geopolitical alignment. It asked how two historically divided communities (Catholic/Republican/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist) use visual symbols not only to assert local belonging but also to position themselves within broader global narratives. Drawing from visual discourse analysis and the frameworks of critical and popular geopolitics, the study revealed that such visual expressions are not neutral reflections of political ideology, but active and strategic constructions of power, space, and identity.

Critical and popular geopolitics was central to this analysis. Following the works of Ó Tuathail (1999), Dodds (2007), Dittmer (2008), and Hughes (2007) this thesis approached murals and flags not as background imagery but as spatial texts that participate in the production of geopolitical meaning. These visuals do not simply "mirror" global conflicts. They re-narrate them from a local vantage point, embedding international struggles within everyday landscapes. In this way, Republican murals and Unionist flags become popular geopolitical artefacts through which communities reimagine themselves as participants in transnational ideological battles. The thesis builds on this theoretical tradition by showing how popular geopolitics operates not only through media or elite discourse, but also through grassroots visual culture that remains physically and emotionally embedded in post-conflict space.

The primary research question asked how murals and flags articulate solidarity with the Israel–Palestine conflict and what this reveals about the geopolitics of post-conflict Northern Ireland. The findings show that Republican murals engage with the Palestinian struggle through emotionally resonant, narrative-driven imagery that highlights themes of colonial resistance and shared trauma. Unionist flags, by contrast, assert a theological and civilizational alignment with Israel through declarative symbols that emphasize divine right, sovereignty, and cultural continuity. These divergent modes of expression reveal fundamentally different understandings of solidarity and identity: Republican visuals invite empathy and identification through shared victimhood, while Unionist visuals project strength, order, and divine sanction.

The first secondary question considered how these visual forms function as expressions of political identity and memory. The evidence confirms that both murals and flags operate as

living archives. Murals, particularly in Republican areas, preserve historical memory while recasting it within new geopolitical contexts; flags in Unionist areas mark territory and reproduce ideological allegiance through repeated and public display. Drawing on Crowley (2022) and Rolston (2011), the thesis argued that these visuals function as “sites of memory” (Nora, 1989), sustaining historical narratives that reinforce community boundaries and political claims.

A related question asked what symbolic elements and visual representations in the murals and flags align the Catholic/Republican community with the Palestinian struggle and the Protestant/Unionist community with Israel. The findings show that Republican murals frequently include affective and political symbols such as the keffiyeh, Palestinian flags, barbed wire, and portraits of figures like Ibrahim Abu Thuraya and Motaz Azaiza. These elements serve to connect the legacy of Irish anti-colonial resistance with contemporary Palestinian struggle, invoking solidarity through shared narratives of occupation and injustice. Conversely, Unionist flags incorporate the Star of David, the Israeli flag, and Christian-Zionist references, which emphasize civilizational and theological kinship. Rather than focusing on shared victimhood, they assert sovereignty and divine promise, reflecting a distinct mode of alignment. These differing symbolic strategies reflect broader community narratives and reinforce the divergent visual cultures that frame geopolitical identity in Northern Ireland.

Another secondary question asked why Republicans and Unionists use different visual forms (murals and flags) to express similar geopolitical themes. The research showed that this divergence stems from both cultural and practical factors. Republican muralism has evolved as a strategic form of visual communication, especially since the 1981 Hunger Strikes, when murals were used to counter censorship and engage external audiences. Loyalist communities, by contrast, rely more heavily on flags due to their lower production cost, rapid deployability, and fit with a theological-symbolic tradition. The decision to analyse these forms together is supported by the fact that both serve comparable political functions, even if they differ in aesthetic and affective style.

The final secondary question asked what similarities and differences exist in their representation of local and global political struggles. Both communities mobilize international conflict to frame their local identities, but they do so in starkly different ways. Republican murals humanize and historicize the Palestinian struggle through layered, emotive imagery. Unionist flags, in contrast, emphasize abstract solidarity with Israel through heraldic and

theological symbolism. Yet both forms reinforce symbolic boundaries in Northern Ireland, transforming contested urban spaces into arenas for geopolitical expression and identity performance.

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary contribution. While much scholarship on Northern Irish visual culture treats murals as tools of either commemoration or peacebuilding, this thesis demonstrates that they are also mechanisms of geopolitical storytelling. It extends the application of critical geopolitics by situating symbolic visual practices within real, contested urban environments, and by demonstrating how local narratives are constructed through global references. This analysis shows that visual culture is not simply the residue of conflict but part of its continuation. Especially when it takes the form of international alignment.

While this thesis offers a focused comparative analysis of how murals and flags in Northern Ireland express geopolitical solidarity, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the visual material is necessarily selective. Although care was taken to choose images that were representative and thematically relevant, the dataset is not exhaustive. The Republican material is concentrated around well-documented sites like the International Wall and Bogside, which may amplify certain narratives while underrepresenting others found in more peripheral areas. Similarly, Loyalist flag displays were photographed in Shankill and East Belfast, but regional variations in flag use and mural content could not be systematically captured within the scope of this project.

Secondly, while the analysis employs visual discourse methods to interpret meaning, it does not include interviews or community perspectives. This decision was intentional: the thesis aims to analyse how meaning is constructed through visual representation and spatial placement, rather than how it is individually perceived. Including interviews would have shifted the focus from symbolic discourse to audience reception, which, while valuable, was beyond the scope and aims of this study. As such, the interpretations remain rooted in image content and context, rather than creator intent or viewer response. Future research could address this gap by combining visual analysis with ethnographic or interview-based methods to better understand how these images are received, maintained, or contested within their communities.

Despite these limitations, this thesis contributes a nuanced understanding of how visual culture operates as a tool of geopolitical alignment in a divided society. It opens the door to further

interdisciplinary exploration of how local and global politics are entangled and made visible in everyday urban landscapes.

While this thesis has focused on a comparative visual analysis of murals and flags in Republican and Unionist communities, future research could expand in several directions. One avenue would be to investigate audience reception – how residents, visitors, or political actors interpret and respond to these visual expressions. This could be explored through interviews, surveys, or ethnographic fieldwork. Additionally, a longitudinal approach could examine how these symbols evolve over time, particularly in response to global events such as escalations in the Israel–Palestine conflict or shifts in local political sentiment. Comparative studies with other post-conflict societies that use visual symbolism such as South Africa or Cyprus could further illuminate how global solidarity is visually constructed across different contexts. Finally, digital visual culture, including online memorials or social media posts replicating mural content, offers a rich but underexplored dimension of how geopolitical identity is performed beyond physical space.

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