

Recognition Twinning and Palestinian Statehood:

Understanding British Twinning

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Abstract

Twinning is a form of paradiplomacy, a concept rooted deeply in history. It involves the exchange of culture, visits and ideas between international communities. Currently, the UK has four cities twinned with Palestinian cities: Oxford – Ramallah, Hounslow – Ramallah, Dundee – Nablus and Glasgow – Bethlehem.

Academic literature in International Law has long debated the requirements for statehood and whether the Palestinian territories qualify for statehood, subject to these requirements. Recognition is an aspect of statehood that has attracted particular attention, with Palestine currently only being recognised as a UN non-member observer state.

This article establishes and defines the boundaries of a new and emerging category of twinning, labelled as 'recognition twinning'. Research was conducted with the following hypothesis in mind: what role does twinning play in Britain's international recognition of Palestine?

The results are framed upon the author's research into international law and its institutions, as well as a series of detailed one-to-one semi-structured interviews, conducted by the author with individuals from multiple Palestine twinning and friendship associations all over Britain.

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a. Introduction:

States and international legal institutions have long debated the legitimization of a Palestinian state. Via an unstable dynamic, legitimization has been 'framed as a prize'² for the Palestinians, to be reached 'when it best serves the objective of peace'.³ While Palestine is currently recognised by 138 of the 193 UN member states, it retains only non-member observer status, denying its representatives the right to engage in general assembly votes and debates.⁴ Despite a multitude of attempts at bringing the conflict to the forefront of international debate, official decision making on the matter remains stifled. With most official avenues blocked, organisations have often resorted to applying indirect pressure on legal institutions and national governments to inspire action. Governments around the world have continued to support the Israeli state, the British government being a pivotal example. However, it is interesting to measure the 'striking disconnect' between politicians and the British public, the former being overwhelmingly pro-Israel while the latter are generally pro-Palestinian.⁵

Since the conclusion of the second world war, British citizens have been engaged in a new method of international communication known as town twinning. Twinning is a form of paradiplomacy, a concept which has been described as 'subnational self-government'.⁶ While historical twinings may have had a specific purpose, subsequent initiatives have served to develop these original motivations. Particularly, the 1980s saw the first twinning between a city in Scotland and a city in Palestine, a non-state entity, that which has since been labelled by Dr Ryan and Dr Mazzilli as a 'solidarity twinning'.⁷

This article explores the various intentions behind British-Palestinian twinings and whether the activities of their relevant associations could contribute to the UK's recognition of Palestine. The arguments presented have emerged from a series of detailed one-to-one semi-structured interviews, conducted by the author with individuals from multiple Palestine twinning and friendship associations all over Britain. Primary interviewees were contacted via their associations and various others were suggested via snowballing. Majority opinions have been collected and will be expressed, although minority opinions will also be incorporated both for completeness and to address the question; what role does twinning play in Britain's international recognition of Palestine?⁸

² Yossi Mekelberg, 'International recognition of Palestine would not be mere symbolism' (Arab News, 4 May 2021) <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1853611>> accessed 25 July 2023

³ Foreign commonwealth and development office, 'Palestinians: Recognition of States' (UK Parliament: Questions, Answers and Statements, 9 February 2021) <<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-02-09/151691#>> accessed 25 July 2023

⁴ UNGA Res 67/19 (2012) 67th session, 37

⁵ Avi Shlaim, 'Anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism in British politics' (Al Jazeera English, Opinions, 12 January 2017) <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/01/170111143904887.html>> accessed 10 July 2023

⁶ Ivo D Duchacek, 'The International Dimension of Subnational Self-Government' (1984) 14(4) Publius: The Journal of Federalism, p5-31

⁷ Holly Ryan, Caterina Mazzilli, 'Debating the Value of Twinning: The Need for a Broader Perspective' (2021) British Politics, p9

⁸ **NOTE: quotations taken directly from interviewees will be expressed via double quotation marks (""), while all other academic references will be single quotation marks (")**

b. The International Context

Under the Montevideo Convention,⁹ 'a state as a person of international law should have the following qualifications: a. a permanent population b. a defined territory c. a government and d. the capacity to enter into relations with other states'.¹⁰ The Convention also brings into question the practice of 'recognition',¹¹ leaving academics split with regards to what recognition signifies in an official capacity; there exists both a declaratory and a constitutive theory of recognition. The declaratory theory suggests that 'recognition merely establishes, confirms or provides evidence of the objective legal situation'¹² whereas the constitutive theory argues that 'only recognition makes a state a state'.¹³ It can be argued that objectively, there is sufficient evidence that Palestine fulfils all other elements of Article 1 of the Convention. Yet, it remains unrecognized as a state, suggesting that international institutions have adopted the constitutive theory in this case. Irrespective of which theory of recognition is followed in this analysis, it remains true that while Palestine lacks recognition it will naturally lack the protections and rights that an official state would be entitled to. Recognition is central to statehood, and only states can fully access the institutions of international law.

In light of the emphasis being placed on recognition in the international arena, communities around the world have taken up various approaches to mutually recognizing one another. Following the end of the second world war, women in the cities of Stalingrad, Russia and Coventry, UK exchanged embroidery with their names and the words 'little help is better than big sympathy' sewn in.¹⁴ The two cities had been heavily bombed during the war and intended to express sympathy and understanding between citizens of the two cities over their shared experiences.¹⁵ Coventry – Stalingrad, later Coventry – Volgograd, became the first official twinning link in history, rooted in values of hope, peace and understanding, irrespective of politics.¹⁶ Despite this, the Russian invasion of Ukraine recently put an end to the decades – long relationship.¹⁷ While the historic relationship was built on friendship, it seems that twinning 'has broadened, deepened, and transformed considerably from its post-war foundations'.¹⁸ However, it remains unclear where the lines are drawn and what exactly twinning has come to represent in modern times. Perm – Oxford, a younger twinning link between major Russian and British cities, also announced the temporary suspension of their twinning following the

⁹ Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (adopted 26th December 1933, entered into force 1934)

¹⁰ Ibid, art 1

¹¹ Ibid, art 2

¹² Stefan Talmon, 'The Constitutive Versus the Declaratory Theory of Recognition: Tertium non Datur?', *British Yearbook of International Law* (2004) p105-106

¹³ Ibid, p101

¹⁴ Jessica Murray, 'Coventry no longer twinned with Volgograd in protest over Ukraine war' (*The Guardian*, 23 March 2023)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/mar/23/coventry-no-longer-twinning-with-volgograd-protest-ukraine-war>> accessed 25 July 2023

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Coventry City Council, 'Volgograd, Russia (Coventry's twinning link with Volgograd is currently suspended) - Coventry's twin towns and cities' (22 March 2023) <<https://www.coventry.gov.uk/directory-record/49250/volgograd-russia-coventry-s-twinning-link-with-volgograd-is-currently-suspended->>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ryan and Mazzilli (n 6) p21

invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹ While this decision was taken by Oxford City Council, the twinning association distanced themselves from the decision, claiming that ‘official twinning has always been a city-to-city relationship, and has never been involved in the political decisions of our rulers’. Only recently, politics has been the cause of another un-twinning between the cities of Barcelona, Spain and Tel-Aviv, Israel, with the mayor of Barcelona citing Israel’s ‘flagrant and systematic violation of human rights’ via its ‘apartheid’ regime as inconsistent with Barcelonian values.²⁰ In retaliation, the Israeli tourism minister asserted that ‘politics and tourism must be separated’, reducing twinning to simply an exchange of tourists, a far cry from its original values.²¹ Evidently, when complex politics intersects with twinning, it reveals a deep division in beliefs about what twinning should represent.

c. The British Position

Currently, there are four twinings between British and Palestinian cities: Hounslow – Ramallah, Oxford – Ramallah, Dundee – Nablus and Glasgow – Bethlehem. Three out of the four are also attached to associations, run by members of their local communities. It seems clear that twinings only really achieve something beyond their title when they are backed up by an active association which serves to organise a variety of activities on the ground, attracting listeners and participants from their localities. In the case of British – Palestinian twinning, associations exist only on the British side, due to various factors inhibiting Palestinian reciprocation such as impoverished living conditions, lack of awareness, and lack of interest. The one twinning without an association, Glasgow – Bethlehem, based this decision on the fact that the economic, political and social status of Palestinians in the Holy Land would make it hard for them to ‘live up to [their] part in any twinning deal’.²² Naturally, having a group of people dedicated to fundraising, organising visits, holding up the large majority of communication and engaging actively with people in their community, makes twinings effective far beyond the recognition which the official link provides. Some twinning associations even have their own constitution, functioning as a sort of miniature legal institution in their own right. During interviews with members from twinning associations, all unanimously expressed that their association was the most active among all twinings in their locality. Many suggested that this was due to the political motivation of those who join the Palestinian twinning associations, acting as an “incentive”²³ for them to engage and dedicate more time than expected in other twinning associations. It was even suggested that cultural events are held to “attract attention”²⁴ while political events are targeted at the “converted”.²⁵

¹⁹ Oxford – Perm Association, ‘An Open Letter to the people of Perm, to the Perm Oxford Society, and especially to those of you who already have friends in Oxford’ (23 March 2023)

<https://www.oxfordperm.org/_files/ugd/d88c54_44381a8660994d04b6980487ae678939.pdf> accessed 25 July 2023

²⁰ Middle East Eye Staff, ‘Barcelona cuts ties with twin city Tel Aviv over Israeli ‘apartheid’ (9 February 2023)

<<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-apartheid-barcelona-cut-ties-tel-aviv-twin-city>> accessed 25 July 2023

²¹ Al Monitor, ‘Barcelona ends twin city agreement with Tel Aviv, citing Israeli ‘apartheid’ (10 February 2023) [https://www.al-](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/barcelona-ends-twin-city-agreement-tel-aviv-citing-israeli-)

[monitor.com/originals/2023/02/barcelona-ends-twin-city-agreement-tel-aviv-citing-israeli-
apartheid#:~:text=Barcelona%20and%20Tel%20Aviv%20signed,to%20revive%20Israeli%20Palestinian%20dialogue](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/barcelona-ends-twin-city-agreement-tel-aviv-citing-israeli-apartheid#:~:text=Barcelona%20and%20Tel%20Aviv%20signed,to%20revive%20Israeli%20Palestinian%20dialogue)> accessed 25 July 2023

²² The Herald Scotland, ‘Holy Row After Glasgow Twins with Bethlehem’ (24th February 2007) <

https://www.heraldscotland.com/default_content/12758138.holy-row-glasgow-twins-bethlehem/> accessed 25 July 2023

²³ Participant Interview No. 20

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *ibid*

The question of whether the twinings are political or not was widely discussed in interviews. While some argued that twinning is primarily a cultural exchange, the overwhelming argument was that British – Palestinian twinings are inherently political. Even the notion of having a twinning sign which says the word ‘Palestine’ on it for all visitors to see is in itself a political statement, “whether the council admits it or not”.²⁶ While the associations may deny being “party political”,²⁷ there is a quiet understanding that the twinning agreements only went through because of certain councillors/parties being in power at the time. Some even contended that if the twinings were to be suggested now instead, they would be rejected due to a shift in council formation. Having a twinning with Palestine approved under the current political climate is such an achievement, so that an interviewee described it as needing a “right time and a right place”.²⁸

Many members of twinning associations were initially attracted due to their involvement in the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, an activist movement which has clear political objectives.²⁹ In line with this background, events held by twinning associations tend towards making political statements about the Israel – Palestine conflict and acknowledging the plight of the Palestinian people via fundraising and material assistance. Former projects have included school links between Palestinian and British students, links between community centres and exchange of ideas, refurbishment of Palestinian community areas, celebration of Palestinian culture via dabke, food and art workshops and most recently, various Nakba commemorations, which were attended by local MPs and councillors. While not directly mediated by the relevant twinning association, other projects have been influenced by twinings, such as the provision of scholarships by the University of Dundee to Palestinian students, links between trade unions and the supply of lifesaving materials to the Palestinians (firefighting equipment, gas masks, etc.) The common denominator here is the recognition of the unequal position of the Palestinian people and the acknowledgement of the political structure that places them in that position.

The practice of group visits, both from Britain to Palestine and from Palestine to Britain, serve to put into perspective the difficulties faced on the journeys both ways. British nationals and residents intending to travel into the West Bank must consider being stopped and questioned by Israeli authorities at Ben Gurion Airport, their safety when travelling within the occupied territories. One interviewee recalled monitoring their social media output prior to their travels, in case of being “interrogated about pro – Palestine content”.³⁰ Palestinians intending to travel to the UK are often forced to travel via Amman rather than go through Israeli internal checkpoints but will also have to anticipate a gruelling visa application process and await the high possibility of rejection. Despite these struggles, group visits both ways achieve some ground-breaking results. They allow for those who visit Palestine to come back and tell their experience to their communities, and vice versa, but also

²⁶ Participant Interview No. 08

²⁷ Participant Interview No. 12, No. 14, and No. 24

²⁸ Participant Interview No. 06

²⁹ Palestine Solidarity Campaign <<https://www.palestinecampaign.org/>> accessed 25 July 2023

³⁰ Participant Interview No. 06

allows Palestinians to encounter a form of trust, confidence and partnership in an international community which they are otherwise alienated from. Specifically, Palestinians are able to “make friends in the right places”,³¹ with people who are capable of and willing to fight for their cause in their absence.

For the small proportion of interviewees who argued that twinning as a concept was not political, they still contended that twinning associations do show occasional political support, but *only* to express the interests of their twins. Often, on the Palestinian side, twinings are requested by local authorities in order to form relationships with people who will ensure their opinions are expressed in their absence. In his letter to the Oxford – Ramallah Twinning, former Mayor of Ramallah Musa Hadid stated that he believed strongly in a ‘bottom up approach’, a model which could ‘drive political changes in governments all round’.³² Thus, regardless of whether the intention behind forming a link is non-political, the output will naturally be political if the British side is to be responsive to the needs and beliefs of the Palestinian side. Inversely, one interviewee even suggested that taking politics out of the question in British – Palestinian twinings is “complicity”;³³ with regards to the Balfour Declaration and Britain’s historical involvement in the formation of the state of Israel. Many believe that Britain is now responsible for peace-making and reversing the situation it created 75 years ago.³⁴ This is not to suggest that twinings should not take place due to Britain’s historical role, but that they can in fact be reparative of the historical injustice on a small scale, so long as the politics is acknowledged. In this way, while the twinning may be “advertised”³⁵ as non-political, in order to make it “hard to criticise”,³⁶ politics remains the heartbeat of British – Palestinian twinings.

While the unique characteristics of British – Palestinian twinings are evident, it is important to note that most interviewees strongly believed that their local councils did not treat their twinning any differently to other twinings. Those local councils who allocated money to the twinings would allocate the same amount to each and would advocate each link just as strongly as the next.³⁷ On one hand, arrangements such as a mayoral state visit to the twinned city are made significantly more difficult in these cases, due to the travel restrictions mentioned above. However, any inequality that does exist is limited to logistical barriers that are a result of the conflict.

Notably, during a speech given at a Balfour Project annual conference, it is noted that ‘governments are often the last to change’. This places an emphasis on local movements to be the drivers for change in national policy, by identifying and targeting official avenues which would desensitise the government and provoke action. If

³¹ Participant Interview No. 04

³² Letter from Mayor Hadid, ‘Dear Friends of Oxford Ramallah Friendship Association’ (27 March 2019) <https://sites.create-cdn.net/sitefiles/61/8/1/618166/letter_from_Mayor_Hadid.pdf> accessed 25 July 2023

³³ Participant Interview 04

³⁴ Balfour Project <<https://balfourproject.org/>> accessed 25 July 2023

³⁵ Participant Interview No. 10

³⁶ Participant Interview No. 01 and No. 16

³⁷ NOTE: the metaphorical significance and emotional exchange of British – Palestinian twinning far outweighs the economic benefits provided. It is in no way logical to suggest that these twinings are purely financial aid, as the amount fundraised is miniscule compared to what is provided by UNRWA and other human rights organisations on the ground.

local councils did not make the decision to twin with Palestinian cities, there would be no example of stable, official, long standing international relations set, for debates to be had comfortably on a national stage. Strikingly, twinnings have gone so far as to influence local councils to recognise the state of Palestine, in contrast to national policy.³⁸ This proves the influence that twinning can have when it is cemented long enough to be normalised and to become part of the fabric of a society. While this milestone has also been achieved in Sheffield, a locality without an official twinning in place, there is still a dedicated friendship association in place which upholds all the same values and habits of a twinning association (Sheffield Labour Friends of Palestine).³⁹ In fact, most twinnings were lobbied and motioned by a preceding friendship association. Friendship associations can achieve just as much as twinning associations in their localities but are more “abstract”.⁴⁰ It seems sensible to suggest that having an influence on politicians and diplomats at national level requires a more “tangible”⁴¹ and official approach that is recognised by lawmakers. Paradiplomacy seems to achieve this as “civic endorsement speaks the language of the law”.⁴²

d. Defining British – Palestinian Twinning

In summary, to twin in the context of Britain and Palestine allows for a historical wound to be tended to. It signifies a grassroots attempt at connecting “people to people”⁴³ and recognising not only the suffering of Palestinian communities, but also the hand dealt by the British in creating that suffering. These twinnings are examples of Palestine’s capacity to enter into stable, firmly rooted international relations and carefully maintain them, thus fulfilling a leg of the requirements for statehood. This research indicates that a new, special category of twinning has emerged, an extension of the aforementioned ‘solidarity twinnings’⁴⁴ into a form of ‘recognition twinning’.

e. Limitations

While this formula may certainly extend to non – British twinnings with Palestine, it is not universal; there are the peculiar Nazareth – Nablus and Gaza City – Tel Aviv (Israel – Palestine) twinnings, which cannot, as yet, be characterised in terms of recognition. These twinnings were made at the time of Yasser Arafat and attempted peace negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinian Authorities and have been left untouched since. It is possible that when these twinnings were established, they may have aligned with the above model of recognition twinning; an attempt made by the two sides to begin peace negotiations. However, with little

³⁸ State of Palestine Mission London, UK, ‘Press Release: The Palestinian Mission to the UK welcomes Dundee City Council's vote to recognise the State of Palestine’ (26 April 2021) <<https://palmissionuk.org/press-release-the-palestinian-mission-to-the-uk-welcomes-dundee-city-councils-vote-to-recognise-the-state-of-palestine/>> accessed 25 July 2023

³⁹ State of Palestine Mission London, UK, ‘Sheffield City Council first UK city to recognize Palestine as a sovereign state’ (4 September 2019) <<https://palmissionuk.org/sheffield-city-council-first-uk-city-to-recognize-palestine-as-a-sovereign-state/>> accessed 25 July 2023

⁴⁰ Participant Interview No. 04

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² Participant Interview No. 12

⁴³ All Participant Interviews

⁴⁴ Ryan, Mazzilli (n 6)

progress made towards peace since their establishment, it seems that they are no longer operating within the frame of recognition twinning. The aspirational element of recognition twinning is that cooperation at low levels will spill over into national affairs. The upwards trajectory of the aforementioned British – Palestine twinings aligns with this aspiration, while the stagnant nature of the Israel – Palestine twinings does not.

Previously, a theme has also arisen of local councils adopting the IHRA definition of anti – semitism alongside any sort of vote on Palestine and its status.⁴⁵ This definition has been subject to criticism, including from Israeli academics and others, but it remains in use.⁴⁶ When voting in favour of twinning, Oxford city council voted to only do so alongside adoption of the new definition. When voting to recognise the state of Palestine, Sheffield city council only did so alongside the adoption of the new definition and interrupted a member of the public who raised the topic of Israel being an apartheid state, despite countless renowned international human rights organisations affirming it.⁴⁷ While the recognition of the discrimination that both Palestinians and Jews experience is necessary, it seems here that Palestinian self – determination is being portrayed as dependant on solidarity with the Jewish community. Ideally, both Palestinian self – determination and solidarity against anti – semitism should be autonomous concepts and remain just as valid. British – Palestinian twinning, once officially agreed upon, is an incredible opportunity to enlighten a community that may otherwise be unaware of the conflict. However, the journey to official recognition is currently revealing the injunction between local and national policies of recognition.

However, the primary fault of “recognition twinning” lies in the idea of even needing a special sub – category. Having to legitimate Palestine through para – diplomatic routes can be seen as a further act of degradation; it cannot be legitimated through international law and so other, different routes must be pursued. Furthermore, giving these twinings special status exceptionalises Palestine, while the end goal should be for Palestine to be treated just like everyone else. Therefore, it seems important to affirm that recognition twinning should only be a means to an end. Even international recognition and statehood itself is “not the end goal nor the solution” for the Palestinians. After all, it has been stated that ‘only an end to the occupation will ensure that Palestinian statehood becomes a reality on the ground’.⁴⁸ Recognition, by the analysis of this article, simply “breaks walls” on a small scale which would seem otherwise unachievable if done on a wider scale. It builds a blueprint for what should be happening on a national and international scale, perhaps even undermining the concept of recognition. If Palestine can fulfil all elements of statehood successfully and still not be granted international statehood and recognition, surely the concept of statehood is flawed at its core?

⁴⁵ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, ‘What is Anti – Semitism?’ <<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>> accessed 25 July 2023

⁴⁶ Vashti, ‘We 66 British academics and Israeli citizens reject the government’s imposition of the IHRA’ (4th February 2021) <<https://vashtimedia.com/2021/02/04/issues/antisemitism/uk-israeli-academics-universities-reject-ihra-definition-antisemitism/>> accessed 25 July 2023

⁴⁷ B’Tselem, ‘A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid’ (12 January 2021) <https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid> accessed 25 July 2023

⁴⁸ Sharif Nashashibi ‘Balfour: Britain’s original sin’ (Al Jazeera English, Opinions, 4 Nov 2014) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/11/4/balfour-britains-original-sin>> accessed 25 July 2023

f. Conclusion

While recognising the limitations of recognition twinning, it nevertheless remains the case that it has the potential to acknowledge Palestinian statehood in operation at a grassroots level. This article has identified that recognition twinning plays an intermediary role in the international recognition of Palestine, acting as a buffer between local councils and national governments. The future of recognition twinning lies in the expansion of the network of Palestinian twinings, which would ultimately gain traction by numbers, desensitising people on a larger scale to the debate on Palestinian statehood, thus placing pressure on the government to act in accordance with the emerging trend.