Visual Representation of the 2023–Present Israel–Hamas War in the Public Space of Helsinki: An Analysis of Street Stickers and Posters

Alena Lochmannová – Ondřej Kolář

Abstract

This qualitative case study examines how the 2023–present Israel–Hamas war is represented in the public space of Helsinki through a small set of posters and stickers. Visual material was photographed in 2024 and eight items were purposively selected for close analysis with attention to visual form and iconography, narrative framing and textual content, and spatial, linguistic and transnational context. All of the images employ an explicitly pro-Palestinian framing in which Palestinian symbols, grievances, and claims are foregrounded, while the Israeli side of the conflict remains almost entirely out of view. The analysis identifies a strong reliance on historical and decolonial references, especially the Nakba and the vocabulary of coloniser and colonised, together with emancipatory slogans such as "Free Palestine" and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free". The posters and stickers also mobilise distinct emotional registers that range from empathy and grief to anger and defiance and they link Helsinki streets to wider activist and diasporic networks through the combined use of English, Arabic and Finnish. The article argues that this cluster of images illustrates a selective and partisan way of framing the war in a Northern European city and discusses what this asymmetry suggests about visual politics in urban public space. Given the small and context specific sample the findings should be read as an exploratory illustration rather than as a representative picture of how the conflict is perceived in Finland.

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Introduction

Urban public space is not only a site of movement and infrastructure. It also functions as a medium in which political messages, identities and conflicts are made visible. Stickers, posters and other small scale printed materials form one of the more modest layers of this visual landscape, yet they often carry strong statements (Awcock, 2021; Awcock & Rosenberg, 2024; Kolář et al., 2024; Mubi Brighenti, 2010). They are cheap to produce, easy to distribute and can be placed on lampposts, traffic signs or walls without formal permission (Awcock, 2021). In many European cities they have become a routine way of commenting on elections, social issues and international events, often in ways that are more direct and confrontational than official communication (Bodden & Awcock, 2024; Imhoff, 2024).

The 2023 attack by Hamas on southern Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza quickly became one of the most visible and polarising international events of recent years. Hamas militants crossed from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel, attacked several kibbutzim and the Nova music festival, killed civilians and took hostages back to Gaza. The killing of Israeli civilians and the taking of hostages were followed by large scale Israeli military operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip (Gozlan et al., 2024; Jamaluddine et al., 2025; Khatib et al., 2024). These developments triggered intense reactions in many countries. Governments, international organisations and civil society actors debated the legitimacy of different forms of violence and responsibility for civilian suffering (Kolář et al., 2024). At the same time protests, counter protests and public campaigns emerged in streets and on university campuses (della Porta et al., 2025; Kaur & Yuchtman, 2024; Ozer et al., 2025). Cities far from the region, including European capitals, became sites where people expressed support, grief, solidarity or anger in relation to the war.

In this context visual production related to the conflict expanded rapidly. Flags, banners, murals and stickers appeared in many urban settings. These images do more than refer to distant events. They compress complex situations into recognisable symbols and slogans, invite viewers to take sides and link local publics to transnational networks of activism and solidarity. Work on visual politics and war has shown that such materials help to shape who is seen as a victim or an agent, how history is remembered and which futures are presented as legitimate. Street level visuals are therefore part of the wider communicative environment through which wars are interpreted far from the sites of fighting (Laba et al., 2025; Santini & Santini, 2025).

This article examines a small group of posters and stickers in Helsinki that explicitly reference the 2023–present Israel–Hamas war. The study asks how the conflict is framed in these images and how they link local public space to wider debates about the war. The analysis takes the form of a qualitative case study and focuses on three aspects of the material, namely visual form and iconography, narrative framing and textual content, and spatial, linguistic and transnational positioning. The aim is not to quantify the presence of conflict related imagery in the city but to offer a close reading of one set of visuals and to trace the kinds of stories about the war that they insert into the everyday streetscape of a Northern European capital.

Methods

This article draws on a small scale qualitative case study of visual political communication in a single European city. Visual material was collected in Helsinki in 2024 during repeated walks through central and inner city neighbourhoods. All stickers and posters in public space that visibly referred to the 2023–present Israel–Hamas war were photographed. From this corpus eight items were selected for close analysis because their condition, photographic quality and content allowed detailed interpretation.

The images were examined using qualitative visual analysis across three dimensions that focused on visual form, narrative framing and textual content, and spatial and linguistic context. The aim was to reconstruct how the war is framed in these examples rather than to measure the frequency of specific motifs. Because the sample is small, purposive and limited to one city, the findings should be read as an illustrative case study of Helsinki public space, not as representative of the city as a whole.

Results

A total of eight visual artifacts related to the 2023–present Israel–Hamas war, found in the public space of Helsinki, were analyzed. The sample consisted of a combination of larger-format posters and smaller stickers, located predominantly on lampposts and other urban surfaces. All of these artifacts employed a clearly pro-Palestinian framing, and none represented the Israeli side in an explicit manner, either visually or textually. In this section, we summarize the visual, narrative, and contextual characteristics of these artifacts.

Types of artifacts and visual strategies

The material included artifacts that ranged from highly figurative to more abstract designs but nonetheless shared several recurring features. Most combined bold textual elements with a central image and relied on a limited color range. Red and pink tones, black and white, and at times green appeared repeatedly and loosely echoed the colors of the Palestinian flag.

Figure 1 is a vertical sticker built around the photograph of a named journalist working in the field. She wears a bulletproof vest labeled "PRESS" and holds a microphone. The image is embedded in a graphic frame with a saturated background color and accompanied by the captions "journalist in Gaza" and "amplify her voice." At the bottom, a QR code and a specific social media handle link the sticker to online environments and connect the physical streetscape with digital media spaces.

Figure 1

By contrast, Figures 2 and 3 rely on illustrated motifs. Figure 2 is a poster depicting a stylised older figure in a keffiyeh holding a large key, surrounded by slogans such as "it's not self defence" and "it's one fucking long Nakba!". The well-known chant "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" is also present, split across the design, with "from the river to the sea" placed in the darker upper band and "Palestine will be free" running along the lower edge of the poster. Figure 3 presents a schematic landscape and a pair of oversized eyes with a drop of blood running from one of them, accompanied by the caption "the Nakba never ended – the colonizer lied". In both cases, the hand-drawn imagery employs a highly

symbolic visual language that links the present moment to a longer historical experience.

Figure 2

Figure 3

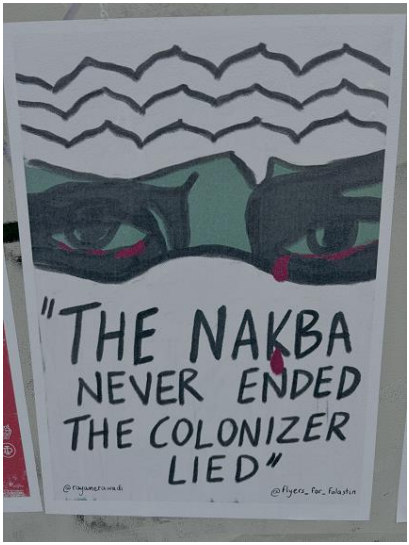
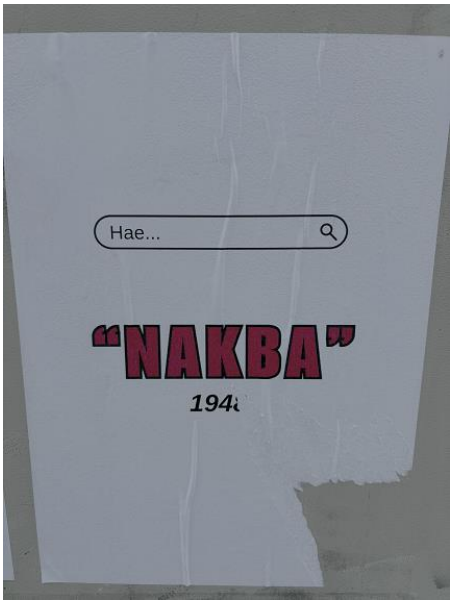


Figure 4 has a deliberately minimalist design. A largely white surface is interrupted by a stylised search bar containing the Finnish prompt “Hae…” and the large word “Nakba”, followed by the year “1948”. The use of the search-interface motif evokes the familiar gesture of “googling” the term and transposes it from the digital screen into the material urban environment.

Figure 4



The remaining four stickers (Figures 5–8) rely more on symbolic elements than on concrete scenes. Figure 5 combines a red flag bearing a hammer and sickle with a Palestinian flag, accompanied by a Finnish slogan calling for a “revolutionary May Day”. Figure 6 features a stylised, undulating flag in soft colours together with the Finnish slogan “Eläköön Palestina” (“Long live Palestine”). Figure 7 combines the fragmentary slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” with the Arabic word Filastīn (“Palestine”), an olive branch and a pattern reminiscent of a keffiyeh. Figure 8 depicts an anonymous veiled figure with prominent eyes, framed by the colours of the Palestinian flag and accompanied by the slogan

"Free Palestine", overlaid with a short Arabic phrase that conveys the same message.

Taken together, the visual corpus ranges from the documentary portrait of a specific individual (Figure 1), through historicising and allegorical illustrations (Figures 2–3) and graphic minimalism centred on a single key term (Figure 4), to aestheticised symbolic motifs that recall contemporary graphic design and popular culture (Figures 5–8).

Figure 5

Figure6

Figure 7

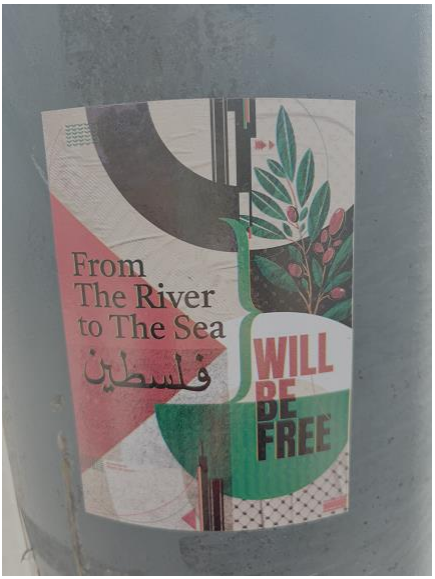


Figure 8

Digitality, transnationality, and localisation

A salient feature of the material is the way it links the physical urban environment to digital infrastructures and transnational networks. Figure 1 includes a QR code and an exact social media handle that allow viewers to follow the named journalist directly. Figures 2 and 3 list the accounts of activist collectives responsible for producing and circulating the posters. Figure 4 draws on the visual form of a search bar, a widely recognised code for online information-seeking. These features suggest that the visual materials are intended less as self-contained images than as entry points to additional content in digital spaces.

In the visual material analysed, three main modes of representing subjects of the conflict can be distinguished. The first involves individualisation through a specific public figure. Figure 1 presents the journalist Doaa J Rouqa by name, face, and professional role. She appears as a young woman working as a reporter in a dangerous environment rather than as a passive victim. The caption "amplify her voice" directly addresses passers-by and invites them to amplify her eyewitness testimony.

The second mode is a collective symbolic figure. Figure 2 uses the image of an older person in a keffiyeh holding a key, evoking the generation of Palestinian refugees and the symbol of the right of return. Figure 8 depicts an anonymous veiled figure with striking eyes, whose face is covered by cloth bearing a keffiyeh pattern. Here too, this is not an identifiable individual but an icon of resistance that can be read as an embodiment of "a Palestinian woman or man in struggle". The gender of these figures is implicit and may be interpreted as rather feminine, but it is not explicitly specified.

The third mode of representing subjects is fully abstract and collective. Figures 5 and 6 show flags and slogans that address Palestine as a national and political entity. Figure 7 relies on metaphors of landscape, river and olive tree and no individual figure is depicted. In this case, the subject of the promise "will be free" is Palestine itself, articulated through text, colour and ornament.

The Israeli side of the conflict does not appear in any of the images as a face, figure or flag. Where the other party is alluded to, this happens only verbally – for instance through the term "the colonizer" or the rejection of the phrase "self defence" (Figures 2 and 3). Within this visual corpus, the representation of actors is therefore clearly asymmetrical: the Palestinian side is shown as both the target of long-term injustice and a collective agent of resistance and emancipation, while Israel is mentioned only indirectly via abstract terms associated with colonisation and deceit. These patterns

indicate a markedly selective, partisan framing of the conflict, shaped by the political commitments and strategic aims of those who design and circulate the posters and stickers, rather than by any aspiration to offer a balanced or multi-perspectival account.

Narrative framings of the conflict

The visual and textual elements work together to produce several recurring narrative frames. The first is the historicisation of present-day violence through the term "Nakba". Figures 2, 3 and 4 refer explicitly to the Nakba of 1948. In Figure 4, the word is paired with the year "1948" and the image of a search bar, which implicitly invites viewers to look up the historical background themselves. Figures 2 and 3 embed the term in formulations such as "one fucking long Nakba!" and "the Nakba never ended", casting the current phase of the Israel–Hamas war as a continuous process that began in the mid-twentieth century rather than as an isolated episode or short-lived military operation.

Closely related to this is a decolonial frame. Figure 3 includes the statement that "the colonizer lied", while Figure 2 challenges the notion of "self defence". Together with the key motif and the figure of a refugee, these captions recast the conflict in the vocabulary of colonial domination, displacement and protracted injustice. In this reading, the current phase of the Israel–Hamas war is implicitly positioned as part of an ongoing colonising project rather than as a bounded act of legitimate defence.

A further narrative pattern centres on emancipatory, future oriented slogans. Figures 6, 7 and 8 use phrases such as "Eläköön Palestina", rendered in English as "Long live Palestine", "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" and "Free Palestine". Together they voice a demand for freedom and continued existence for Palestine as a political subject. In these images the language of accusation and detailed depictions of violence recede. What comes to the foreground is affirmation, continued presence and a claim to self determination. In this frame the conflict appears as a matter of political agency and collective autonomy rather than a technical security problem.

Some of the material uses openly radical or strongly expressive wording. Figure 2 includes the phrase "one fucking long Nakba!" which reinforces an impression of anger and frustration. Combined with the retro poster aesthetics this vocabulary contributes to a sense of radical protest that still draws on the visual traditions of earlier social movements.

Figure 1 occupies a distinct position in the material and frames the conflict primarily through the lens of witnessing and informational freedom. Rather than commenting directly on the legitimacy of military action, it focuses on the safety and audibility of a single journalist in Gaza. The narrative shifts towards the question of who is able to tell the story of the conflict and how residents of Helsinki are invited to amplify that voice.

At the same time the material shows clear linguistic and cultural localisation to the Helsinki context. Figure 4 uses Finnish in the prompt "Hae…", Figure 5 draws on the Finnish tradition of vappu as a labour and student holiday and recasts it as a "revolutionary first of May" to which a Palestinian flag is attached, and Figure 6 employs the Finnish slogan "Eläköön Palestina". Taken together these items explicitly address a Finnish speaking audience and indicate that the issue of Palestine has been woven into the local political vocabulary and calendar.

In addition, English and Arabic writing appear repeatedly across the material. English functions as a lingua franca of global activism and makes the messages accessible to an international urban audience, while Arabic signals a connection to Palestinian identity and diaspora communities. In some stickers, Figures 7 and 8, the two scripts overlap within a single visual field with no clear hierarchy between them.

The transnational character of these aesthetic codes is also evident. The motifs of the keffiyeh, the olive tree, the key, bloody tears and the slogan "From the river to the sea" belong to a repertoire of symbols that circulate within pro-Palestinian activism across different European cities. In this sense, public space in Helsinki can be read as one node in a wider visual network in which such motifs are produced, disseminated and adapted to local contexts.

Emotional and affective registers

The visual material mobilises emotions ranging from empathy and anger to hope. Figure 1 invites empathy for a young journalist who carries out her work under threat and it activates a sense of moral responsibility to "amplify her voice". Figures 2 and 3 evoke anger and indignation through their verbal choices and through visual motifs of blood, a refugee with a key and an ongoing, unresolved trauma. Figure 4 has a more didactic, curiosity driven tone and encourages viewers to search for information rather than presenting it directly.

Figures 6 and 7 draw on affirmative and hopeful motifs. The slogans "Eläköön Palestina" and "will be free" point to a future in which Palestine

is imagined as both free and alive. Figure 8 combines an aestheticised form of militancy with a clear emancipatory demand "Free Palestine". The presence of a veiled figure with an intense gaze conveys determination and resistance rather than mere vulnerability.

Taken as a whole, the material traces three main emotional lines. The first stresses suffering and long term trauma, for example the Nakba, bloody tears and the language of unending violence. The second foregrounds resistance and defiance, including the anonymous fighter figure, the key and keffiyeh motifs and the links to left wing May Day traditions. The third expresses hope for future freedom and for the continued existence of Palestine as a political subject.

Discussion

This case study suggests that even a small cluster of posters and stickers in a single European city can crystallise a highly specific way of seeing the 2023–present Israel–Hamas war. In the material examined, visual attention is directed almost exclusively towards Palestinian symbols, grievances and political claims, while the Israeli side remains largely out of view. This imbalance appears to follow the priorities of particular activist networks that invest time and resources in promoting one preferred reading of the conflict in Helsinki's streets. The segment of public space documented here functions less as a forum in which competing narratives meet and more as a surface on which a single political voice is repeatedly inscribed.

The analysis also indicates that the visual material leans strongly on historical and decolonial frames. References to the Nakba, to relations between coloniser and colonised and to a continuous line of injustice link recent events to a much longer history of displacement. To some extent this helps to foreground the temporal depth of the conflict and to remind viewers that it did not begin in 2023. At the same time this perspective simplifies a complex and internally diverse history and places Palestinian suffering at the centre, while Israeli fears, losses and security concerns remain largely absent. Slogans such as "Free Palestine" and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" can be read as claims to dignity and self determination. In contemporary debates they are also highly contested and some audiences understand them as calling for the exclusion of Israel or as disregarding Jewish collective security. The material examined here shows how these phrases appear in an aesthetically softened form in the streetscape, but it does not tell us how different groups of viewers actually interpret them.

The emotional dimension of the images is similarly ambivalent. On one level they make visible the suffering of civilians and the work of journalists operating under threat and create space for empathy. On another level the use of vulgar and accusatory phrases such as "one fucking long Nakba" and "the colonizer lied" fosters a highly polarised reading of the war and leaves little room for ambivalence or for acknowledging that Hamas is also an armed actor that violates international humanitarian norms. The multilingual and transnational aesthetic codes add another layer of complexity. English and Arabic link the Helsinki streetscape to global activist and diasporic networks, while Finnish anchors the messages in local political culture. Motifs such as the keffiyeh, the olive tree, the key and the slogan "From the river to the sea" can carry very different meanings in different settings. What one viewer understands as an expression of solidarity another may experience as threatening or exclusionary.

As a small qualitative case study based on one city, this work has several limitations. It draws on a purposively selected set of eight pieces of visual material documented during a single period of fieldwork in Helsinki in 2024. The sample comes mainly from central and inner city neighbourhoods and does not capture visual communication in other parts of the city or in other locations in Finland. The analysis focuses on the posters and stickers themselves and does not systematically incorporate data on their production, circulation, lifespan or reception. It also considers only pro Palestinian imagery and therefore sheds no light on pro Israeli visuals or on places where different narratives might be displayed side by side. The findings should be read as an exploratory case study of one specific cluster of images rather than as a representative account of how the war is perceived in Helsinki or in Finland more broadly.

Conclusions

This case study shows how a small cluster of posters and stickers can anchor a specific reading of the 2023–present Israel–Hamas war in the public space of a Northern European city. In the Helsinki material the conflict is framed almost entirely through Palestinian symbols, grievances and political claims, supported by historical and decolonial references and by emotionally charged slogans. The Israeli side is largely absent as a visual or textual subject. The images make Palestinian victimhood and resistance highly visible, while Israeli fears, losses and security concerns remain outside the frame. Taken together, the findings point to a selective framing

of the war that reflects the priorities of particular activist networks using street level visuals to intervene in public debates about a distant conflict.

At the same time the analysis underlines that these observations are tied to one small and context specific set of visuals. They do not speak to other parts of Helsinki, to other Finnish cities or to possible pro Israeli or more mixed visual repertoires. Future research could build on this case by comparing different neighbourhoods and countries, by including material from opposing political camps and by combining visual analysis with audience research. Such work would help clarify how street based images contribute to polarisation or dialogue and how they shape understandings of war far from the places where violence occurs.

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Contact:

Mgr. Ing. Alena Lochmannová, Ph.D. et Ph.D., MBA

Department of Crisis Management
Faculty of Security Management
Police Academy of the Czech Republic in Prague
Email Address: lochmannova@polac.cz
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7822-0204

Mgr. Ondřej Kolář, Ph.D.

Department of Security Studies
Faculty of Security Management
Police Academy of the CzechRepublic in Prague
Email Address: kolar@polac.cz
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4330-2637